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The Three Spotters' Duel in the Dark.

BY MARCUS H. WARING—"Sergeant Mark."

FROM
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WITH THE SKILL OF A PRACTICED HAND HE HAD PREPARED FOR A CAST, AND AS SHE MOVED HE ACTED.

The Three Spotters' Duel in the Dark;

OR,

The Thugs and Trailers of Gotham.

BY MARCUS H. WARING,

("SERGEANT MARK,")

AUTHOR OF "THE THREE SPOTTERS," "THE STREET SPOTTERS' WEIRD HUNT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DESPERATE DEED ATTEMPTED.

A HOUSE-TOP on Thirteenth street, in the city of New York.

Up the ladder from the top floor, and through the scuttle came a woman who, perhaps, was thirty years of age. Evidently, she was a stranger there, for, once on the roof, she paused and looked around as if to see the exact condition of the place.

This done she advanced quickly to the edge of the roof.

Five stories below lay the street—a street never subject to the turmoil and bustle of trade, and, at that particular moment, almost deserted through the entire block.

She seemed to give no thought to that, but looked down at the hard, rough pavement. Then she turned her gaze upward. The sun was shining, and the great city was bathed in its splendor, but she gave it no heed. She fell upon her knees, and her hands were clasped nervously.

"Heaven forgive me!" she brokenly murmured; "may Heaven forgive me!"

Up to the roof, by the same route she had come, came a second person, a man. He paused and looked at her keenly and critically. In one hand he carried a coil of flexible stuff: the genuine lasso of the Western cowboy. He hesitated; then began to loosen the coils with extreme caution. He might have been less careful; she gave heed to nothing around her.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

Her feet pressed the very verge of the roof.

She flung her arms up heavenward.

"Farewell, life!" she cried. "Welcome, death!"

She sprang forward from the roof; forward toward the street and its pitiless pavement, where a fall meant death.

But the man with the lasso had not been idle. With the skill of a practiced hand he had prepared for a cast, and as she moved he acted.

Strange sight in New York, the lasso went flying through the air.

A boy of fourteen years was passing through the street. He heard sounds above—a shock—he looked up. He saw a woman dangling at the edge of the roof, suspended by some invisible power.

The sight startled him. It had been sudden and wholly unexpected; it was a sight he never had seen before. His ideas worked rapidly, if in confusion, and, seeing that the door of the house stood open, he gained an idea based on the vague belief that she had accidentally slipped and was hanging by means of her own strength.

"Hang on!" he shouted. "Hang like a good feller, an' I'll be there in a jiff!"

He sprang through the open door; he rushed madly up the stairs. Excitement and zeal gave metaphorical wings to his feet, and his speed was remarkable. Long as the journey seemed, he made it in very short time, and without encountering any one. He did not think to sound an alarm.

He sprang out on the roof.

There he saw a peculiar sight. Close to the edge of the roof was a man, and while he held fast to a rope with one hand, he was trying to draw to the roof with the other the woman, whose head and shoulders were barely visible.

"Keep yer grip!" cried the boy. "I'm with yer!"

The man looked around.

"Quick!" he exclaimed. "You have come just in time. Grasp this lasso and hang on for life. See?"

"I'm on!"

The new-comer seized the line, and, bracing as well as the nature of the roof would allow, proceeded to "hang on for life." His ally did not release his hold on the woman, and now, having both hands at his disposal, he proceeded to lift with zeal. It was no easy task, but he finally raised her to the level in safety. He drew a sigh of relief.

"By George! I'm glad that's over!" he declared.

"Fainted, ain't she, mister?"

"More likely her insensibility was caused by the shock of falling."

"Why, this rope is clean around her, an' it's a lasso. Yowlin' cats! w'ot does this mean, mister?"

"It means that I lassoed her just as she was about to leap into the street."

"To leap— Say, d'ye mean she tried ter commit suicide?"

"Exactly."

"Yowlin' cats!" the boy again exclaimed, in amazement.

"I suspected her object and followed her to the roof, equipped with the lasso. I cast it very accurately, as she was about to leap, but, unluckily, an instant too late; at the last her movements were very rapid, and I barely missed losing her. As it was she went over the edge. Luckily, the coil was about her shoulders, and the only ill effect was to bring her up hard against the edge of the roof. The shock stunned her, it seemed, but I hope she is not injured."

The speaker looked at the unconscious woman somewhat anxiously.

"Don't we want ter call her female folks?" the boy asked.

"I am not so sure of that. Mrs. Gray is a very retiring, unobtrusive woman, and, having no 'folks,' as far as I know, might not want her neighbors to meddle with her."

He walked to the edge again, and looked down into the street, and at the windows opposite.

"It is remarkable," he added, "but no one except you seems to have seen this occurrence. For her sake let us see if we can't manage the affair without bringing her into notoriety. You hold her head, and I will carry her down into her room. That's right, young— What is your name?"

"Bobby Blossom."

"Mine is Gus Leonard. Now, carefully!"

The man was big and strong, and of hearty manners, but toward the unfortunate woman he was as gentle as one of her own sex could be. Aided by the boy he carried her down the ladder and to her room, which was on the top floor. Like most New York houses the greater part of this floor was a wilderness where trunks, old boxes, and odds and ends had collected. The general tenant let furnished rooms. There was but one room of this class on the top floor, and Mrs. Madeline Gray occupied it.

As they brought her in, Bobby Blossom looked around critically. It was a large room, looking to the right and left, but the ceiling was low and the windows small. It was plainly and sparsely furnished, and the carpet on the floor, originally very cheap, was now about as threadbare as it could be.

The lady, herself, was plainly dressed, but Bobby was a shrewd observer, and he was impressed with the fact that she did not seem to fit her surroundings.

He noticed several little things that went to tell of marked refinement, and hint that the lowly life of a humble house and poor neighbors had not always been her lot.

She was a fine-looking woman, too, with a form of singular perfection, and a face no one could fault.

"Why did she try ter kill herself?" he asked, in wonder.

"Because she is a living mystery."

"A w'ot?"

"I know but little more of her than you do, but that little is enough to make me think that persecution and wrongs, perhaps romance and crime, figured in her past. I have a room on the floor below, but none of us know much about Madeline Gray. With the petty meanness sometimes seen in the sex, some of the women in the house call her a proud upstart, but I admire and pity her. This woman has suffered—what? I know not. I wish I did."

He was gazing attentively at her face, but suddenly averted.

"We lose valuable time!" he exclaimed. "This delay is criminal. Look in the closet, boy, and see if you find any restorative."

Bobby obeyed. The first thing he discovered when he opened the door gave him a shock. There was a bright glitter, and he saw in a box a quantity of set diamonds which must have represented hundreds of dollars, while beside the box was a big pile of bank-notes, neatly arranged, the upper one representing one hundred dollars.

And on the money was a slip of paper with this brief inscription:

"Give all I have to the poor when I am dead."

"MADELINE GRAY."

Bobby could only look in amazement.

"Yowlin' cats!" he commented, "of these ain't queer belongin's fer a woman that lives in a barren garret I'm er perjurer. What is the mystery of her life?"

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERY OF MADELINE.

THERE was other evidence that Mrs. Gray had not lived poorly. She was her own housekeeper, and in the closet was an abundance of food, cooked and uncooked, and all of the very best grade.

The mystery was, indeed, strong. Why did this woman, who had abundant means and, plainly, was no miser, live in the barren attic of a poor, plain house, among poverty-stricken neighbors?

Bobby Blossom caught sight of a bottle of wine, nearly full, too; and he quickly carried it to Gus Leonard, with a drinking-glass. The latter poured out a generous quantity and deftly tipped it into her mouth.

"You must be a boss lasso-thrower, mister," remarked the boy, looking at the article mentioned.

"I learned it on the plains of Texas."

"Cowboy, eh?"

"I was, but I left the life a year ago."

"Come down ter humdrum life, hev ye?"

"I cannot say I liked wild life; there's more hard work and hardship to it than pleasure, and absolutely no romance. Still, I was brought back by a rich relative to whom I am heir, who promised much and did little. The old lady and I are a trifle on the outs, now; she is willing I should live here like a semi-beggar, and I don't object. Lord love you, no; I'm independent, you see. Earn a precarious living, eat what I can scare up, sleep well, and owe nobody abject homage."

"That's the proper caper," agreed Bobby, much impressed by Gus's straightforward, but modest, manner.

"New Yorkers are not apt to be toddlers, anyhow."

"Only a few cranks who worship the rich folks, know the house of ev'ry nabob on Fifth avenue, an' turn green with envy while they worship. Them is a few New Yorkers who ought ter been drowned in Noah's flood. But Mrs. Gray, here: don't yer know why she tried to commit suicide?"

"No. She has made no acquaintances here, in the real sense of the word. She is very reserved; bows to those whom she can't ignore, she sees them so often—this includes me—but has no intimates. On two occasions she has given money generously to the sick and needy, but when they got well, she kept them at a distance."

"Funny woman!"

"A woman with a history!"

"An unwritten history."

"Emphatically so, as far as we know. But, hush—she is coming to!"

Leonard's observation had not deceived him, for she soon opened her eyes. She looked around, shivered; then closed her eyes again.

"Be at ease!" Gus urged. "You are safe. All is well."

"All is not well—I am alive!"

She pronounced the words in a mournful, disappointed way which made Bobby Blossom feel "creepy," as he expressed it.

"Why did she so desire death?"

"Now, Mrs. Gray, this is not just," Gus urged. "Your life is too valuable to be lost."

"Valuable! To whom?"

"Yourself—your friends."

"I have no friends."

"Wrong! You see two of them here."

"I know no better friend than the grave. The embraces of the human kind relax when their hearts grow cold; that of the grave endures forever."

"It holds the senseless clay, but what of the immortal soul? But let me not preach. Mrs. Gray, I am reluctant to refer to the matter, but you have narrowly escaped death by your own act."

"I know not how, but I feel that you saved me. I do not thank you."

"At present you are ill in body and mind. Weigh not my act, wholly friendly though it was, but look to the future. You live; you possess that breath of life, Divinely bestowed, which no one of this earth has a right to take away. Turn your back on the past. If it has been bitter, wait for happier days. If you are friendless, be so no longer; accept me as a friend, humble but true. If you have suffered wrongs, let me avenge them."

"No, no!"

The Three Spotters' Duel in the Dark.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGE WANDERER.

A YOUNG girl was passing along Greenwich avenue with a loaf of bread in her hand. A man passed her, and looked so attentively as to attract her attention. She thought herself the object of the scrutiny, and looked to learn the cause, and see who the man was, but was surprised to see that he was eying the bread hungrily.

Pity, quick and sure, was aroused in her sympathetic mind. The man was poorly dressed, and his face was haggard, unshaven, and deeply-lined for one of his years, but he was not ill-looking.

She was tempted to address him, but, while she hesitated, she reached the door of her house. She stopped, was undecided what to do, but finally ended by opening the door preparatory to entering.

Seeing this, he turned back quickly, and came up to her.

"For heaven's sake," he exclaimed, "give me something to eat!"

"Be you reely hungry?" she asked, quickly.

"I am starving!"

"You sha'n't starve while I have anything to eat. Come in, an' I'll give you food."

"But your folks—"

"Mebbe nobody is there; ef there is, you'll not be the less welcome."

"Bless you, child!" he cried, hoarsely. "I am no fraud, I am not a man unwilling to work. I suffer, and your goodness will not be rejected."

She conducted him to a room on the third floor. It was plainly furnished, but large and pleasant. She gave him a seat, and then quickly sliced the bread and put it on the table, with cold meat, pie, cheese, and wine—the latter because his wan face told of the need of some stimulant.

And he did justice to the substantial, though plain, repast. He ate eagerly, rapidly, voraciously; and her satisfaction over her own charity grew as she saw how genuine had been his claim that he was hungry.

He was finishing the meal by eating the pie, at last, when the door opened, and a plainly-dressed, honest-looking man of middle age entered. One physical feature at once became noticeable: the lower half of his left leg was a wooden peg, only.

"Uncle," said the girl, quickly, "this is a hungry man I brought in to feed."

He of the wooden leg looked sharply at the eater.

"You did right, Bertina, quite right," he returned. "Stranger, eat hearty an' give the house a good name."

"Sir, I thank you warmly. I was afraid you would object."

"I hope it never will be said of old Stumps—my name is Stumps, sir—that he begrudged a hungry man food when he was honest. Eat, an' be happy; a full stomach makes a man full o' grace. I didn't ketch yer name, sir."

"It is Ezra Otis."

"Live nigh here?"

"I don't know where I do live; I am homeless. Last night I slept in a station-house. They showed me where to lie, but not where to eat."

"They stomach is a wounded funny tenant within us," remarked Mr. Stumps, gravely. "We hev ter pay rent to it, an' it ain't never satisfied. It takes all we kin give it, waits a bit, an' then calls fer more."

"And does not always get it."

"Too true."

"Well, sir, I have eaten and am filled, and my most grateful thanks are yours. Now, I can go on my way without physical trouble."

"Which way is your way?"

"I know not; the homeless never do."

"Have you no work?"

"None at all."

"Mebbe I kin find some fer you."

Ezra Otis's face suddenly lighted up with grateful pleasure.

"Indeed, sir, if you could I should be most happy. I am not lazy; I am willing to work; but I have nothing to do. If you can point out something, however humble, I shall owe you a debt of lasting nature."

"It shall be worked. I can't say jest w'at, now, fer the necessity comes unexpected, but you kin trust in me. I like yer looks, so I'm sure you kin give good references as ter your honesty, an' I an' my friends will look up a job, fer we hev some influence. You see, I'm a detective, or, at least, partner to a detective; same thing."

The wanderer's worn face had been bright and hopeful until Stumps spoke of references as to

honesty; then it clouded perceptibly. But when the speaker announced his calling there came another change, swifter and more pronounced. His face paled, and he sat looking at Stumps in great terror.

"A detective!" he gasped.

"Yes. Why, what—"

Ezra Otis started up nervously.

"I must go!" he declared. "I—I have an engagement. I am not well, I—"

"Wait, wait!" urged Stumps, putting his cane out in front of the wanderer. "Don't rush away like that. What hev I said ter unsettle you? Surely, et ain't because I am a detective?"

"No, no; it wasn't that; of course not. I only—I promised a friend to come right back."

"But you intimated you hadn't no friends."

"You misunderstood me; you certainly did. It's all right, sir, and I am very much obliged for the food. I will call and see you again, and will try to pay you—that is, I'll take the work you speak of, and manage to square the account. You are very kind, and I'll call again—soon!"

This rambling address was made in a trembling voice, and Otis nervously turned his gaze from side to side as if he expected to see some one appear and do him harm in some way; and when he had spoken the last abrupt word he made for the door with haste which was almost precipitate flight.

For awhile his hasty steps were heard on the stairs, and then all was still.

When Stumps saw the mood he was in he had made no further effort to detain him; but as the last sound died away he turned his gaze upon Bertina and shook his head gravely.

"Child," he said, with a sigh, "this is a world o' trouble fer many a poor human bein'!"

"Why," asked the girl, seriously, "did he fall inter such a sudden panic?"

"What could it be but because I said I was a detective? Simple as them words was, they must hev meant a good 'eal ter Ezra Otis."

"They scared him clean out o' his wits!" Bertina quickly agreed. "Uncle, why need such a man fear a detective? I can't think he ever did anything wrong."

Again Stumps shook his head.

"Far be it from me ter unjustly judge any man, an' I wouldn't whisper these words ter any of our neighbors; but what are we to think now? What *can* we think, save one thing? The man set here, grateful an' happy, his face beamin' with pleasure at the idee o' gettin' work, but the moment I mentioned I was a detective he fell inter an awful fright. He got as pale as a ghost, an' scarcely knew what he said, after; an' he soon took ter mad flight. I hope he's all right, but what *can* we think?"

"Ef he's done wrong, I know he was led into it!" declared Blonde Bert, loyally.

"Bless your kind heart, child! I'm glad you take that view of it, an' I more'n half believe you are right. I wish he had stayed ter say more."

"Will he come back?"

"Never!"

Bertina sighed. Both she and Stumps had grown interested in the man, and it was not idle curiosity which made them wish so strongly that they knew the cause of his alarm, and the history of the past. He had so impressed upon them, without effort of his own, the belief that he was a worthy man that they were reluctant to believe him as much open to danger from the law as his headlong departure would intimate.

As his words indicated, Stumps was very much disappointed because Otis had not remained and told his story.

"Would they ever know it, now?"

"Was the mystery of his life forever veiled?"

While they were considering this point, quick, light steps were heard on the stairs.

"Bobby!" exclaimed Stumps, smiling.

Then into the room rushed young Mr. Blossom excitedly, and down on the floor he dashed his cap.

"Hi, Bert!" he cried, "I've got a job fer you!"

"A job for me!" Bertina echoed.

"Yes, an' one fer *The Three Spotters*, I reckon. Stumps, where is Jim Royal? I want his leave fer us ter go inter a new detective case. Stumpsey, I b'lieve there's fun ahead!"

CHAPTER IV.

CHUNKY JAKE SEEKS HIS PREY.

WHEN Ezra Otis left the house he walked rapidly down Greenwich avenue, and was so near the Eighth street station of the Elevated Road. At that point he came under the note of a man who, at sight of him, stopped short in surprise and incredulity.

"I would do so gladly, and you would owe me no debt."

"It cannot be."

"Do you decline all help?"

"I must. Leave me alone."

"Not until you have given me one promise!" declared Leonard, firmly.

"And that?"

"Is that you will not again attempt your life."

"I can make no promise."

"Madam, this shall not be; your life is not yours to toss away like a bauble. Even among those of mortal attributes there is one who has a claim upon it, and that one is *myself*! I have saved that life; it is, in part, mine. I demand that it shall be preserved. Madam, you must, you *shall* promise not to repeat your mad attempt!"

His bold, authoritative manner was the best that could have been adopted. She roused from her hopeless mood and looked at him in wonder and surprise.

Gradually, a new expression appeared in her face.

"You are right, and I am wrong," she admitted. "I have no right to take my own life. I will not take it."

Her manner was submissive, not thankful; it was as if she bowed meekly to more trouble. Then she added:

"To you who have saved my life I will say that it is in keeping with the nature of what I believe you to be: an honest, bold and kind-hearted man. It was generous in you."

The peculiar way of expressing her indebtedness showed that she was not glad the work had been done, but let it rest at that.

"Now leave me alone, please," she went on.

"Are you sure you are uninjured?"

She rose from the lounge upon which he had placed her, and moved about freely.

"I am not injured," she asserted. "I will see you again."

Despite the further hint that she wanted to be rid of him, Leonard hesitated. She noticed it, and smiling drearily, gave the promise:

"I shall not harm myself. Have no fear."

"Very well. If you want help in any way, please call on me."

He bowed, and preceded by Bobby Blossom, left the room. He had unostentatiously taken his lasso along, and, proceeding to coil it, he walked down the stairs to the next floor, and into his own room. So absorbed was he in thought that he did not realize that he had a companion until he turned to close the door and saw Bobby in the way. The boy had followed quietly, but pertinaciously, for he wanted to know more about Madeline Gray.

"Excuse me," said Gus, courteously. "My wits were wool-gathering. Come in!"

"Mister, is it safe ter leave her alone?"

"That's what is troubling me."

"You presented a good logerkel argument that Judge Duffy, or Judge Martine, needn't be ashamed on, but it was *only* an argument. No reel, open-an'-shut reason why she should change her mind an' feel that life's worth livin' fer."

"True."

Gus flung down the lasso, and began to pace the room in a nervous way.

"What we have to fear most," he remarked, "is solitude. Left alone day after day as she is, Mrs. Gray has nothing to do but brood over her wrongs. Solitude is her worst foe; it is the strongest ally of the destroyer, Death. If Mrs. Gray only had a companion, so her mind would be occupied! I have a crude idea, but how can it be worked? No companion can be forced upon her by ordinary means. I was wondering if it could not be worked by means of her well-known bent for charity. But there is no one to put forward."

"I know just the person!" Bobby exclaimed.

"You do? Who is it?"

"Blonde Bert."

"A man? Nonsense!"

"Blonde Bert ain't no man; she's a female girl, she is; aged erbout fourteen. She's named Bertina Laselle, reelly, but is 'most always called Bert, an' she's a blonde, Ketch on?"

"You know this girl?"

"Rayther!"

"But would she come here?"

"You bet!"

"Is she honest, amiable, intelligent, fairly refined, sympathetic and shrewd?"

"All o' them, an' more; warranted not ter kick, bite, shy or 'crib.' See her, an' judge fer yerself."

"I will, and if she proves all right, I'll pay her to come here as aforesaid. Bring on the girl!"

Then joy flashed to this person's face. "Whoop, Jule Caesar!" he muttered; "I'll be dratted if this ain't the bossiest diskivery o' the year. Hi! my run-down laddy, Chunky Jake will jest take a card on you. Gee! I'll foller the critter ter whar he yards up, an' then spring de trap on him. Howlin' Hannah! but ain't this prime!"

He grimaced grotesquely to evidence his satisfaction, but as an act of art the grimace was a total failure. He who had called himself Chunky Jake had been supplied by Nature with a face which came close to beating the record for ugliness, and he made a bad matter worse by twisting the brutal, irregular, mis-shapen apology for a face. Homely and brutal-like as Chunky Jake was he was not handicapped as to strength; he had the physique of an athlete.

Falling in behind Otis he went along in his rear across Sixth avenue and eastward, but he did not enjoy a monopoly.

Unknown to him he had been followed before he saw Otis, and as the pursuit was kept up the peculiar condition of a double chase was presented, though the third man did his work so neatly and shrewdly that no one would suspect he was abroad on business out of ordinary channels, or that he cared a rap for Chunky Jake.

This third person was young—it was doubtful if he had reached his twenty-first year—but he had a mature, resolute face, an athletic physique, and general air of solidity which was impressive.

It did not take him long to see that Jake was pursuing the leader of the trio, but the fact only aroused the inquiry:

"Is the fellow looking for prey?"

Otis went as nearly due south-east as the street arrangements would allow, and was thus brought to Washington Square. There he paused. His manner had indicated a desire to sit down and rest, but the day being warm, the popular Square was so crowded that he changed his mind.

He went on again toward the east, but after passing the Square his steps became slow and his manner uncertain. Chunky Jake's plan of tracing him to his home did not look promising; that knave had seen enough of the ups and downs of life to suspect that his man knew not where to go for shelter; and he began to close up.

In this respect he was imitated by the youngest of the trio, and the three drew near together.

Jake reached his prey and seized his arm, whereupon Otis turned like a flash, his manner betraying fresh terror. He recoiled at sight of the other, and the color fled anew from his face.

The man at the rear could not see the latter fact, but did know that Chunky Jake had given the leader a shock. Their first words, too, were lost on him, but what followed was audible.

"I tell you that you're mistaken!" asserted the stranger. "My name is Ezra Otis."

"Ezra Granddaddy!" sneered Jake.

"My name is Otis."

"Now, you see hyer, you little fool! do yer think you kin bamfoodle me? Don't I know ye? Ain't yer poaty mug as familiar as the dirt under my nails? Now, you shut up; ef yer give me any more o' yer lies I'll smash you in the jaw. See?"

He at the rear would have paused and let Otis and Jake have their talk out, in order to gain points, but at that moment the rough caught sight of him. So up to the couple the young man at once walked.

"At your old tricks, Jake, are you?" he asked.

"Eh? Wot's that?"

"Seeking prey, I see."

"I ain't seekin' nothin'."

"That won't go down."

"An' who in blazes be you who questions me?" blustered Jake. "I won't hev it; I take no lip from no man. See?"

"I hear your vainglorious talk, my jail-bird bully, but I think you are joking. To return your favorite word in a different light, I will say—See?"

The speaker turned back the lapel of his vest, and the badge of a New York detective sparkled before Jacob's eyes. It had magical effect upon him. He never had been detective, attorney, judge or jurymen, but had had considerable experience with detectives, nevertheless—with the machinery of law and the penalties of crime, he weakened at once.

"With I ain't doin' nothin'," he whined. "You have evil designs on this man."

"No, I ain't."

"I know it is false. Be careful, Chunky Jake, you will again see the interior of Head-

quarters, and get a sweat in Inspector Byrnes's private room."

The threat alarmed Jake more than ever, but, though thick-headed in certain ways, he had been keen enough to see his way clear.

Quickly pointing to Otis he exclaimed.

"Ask him! ask him! Feller, hev you any complaint to make ag'in' me?"

"No; none whatever," Otis answered hurriedly.

"I see it is some affair where soiled linen may be ready to fall from both shoulders, and as I know of no reason to follow it up—it is not my case—we will not press the point. Still, I fancy your acquaintance will feel safer away from you."

"Mr. Otis, you can go!"

"Thank you!"

The reply was promptly made, and Otis walked off with long steps. Chunky Jake stood in uncertainty. It was not so much regret at losing his prey that was in his mind, but he was tempted to make a certain revelation, and knew not whether such was his best course. If there had not been a shadow hanging over himself which made all men and machinery of law a living nightmare to him he would have spoken. He was tempted to do so, anyhow, but, while he hesitated, Otis disappeared around a corner.

"What new villainy are you in, Jake?" asked the detective.

The rough turned, looked at the detective and whined:

"Sure, I'm not in any!"

"I don't believe it. Even before you saw this Ezra Otis, whoever he is, your manner was that of one who was meditating mischief."

"Boss, be you Jim Royal, one o' The Three Spotters?"

"I am."

"I've jest recognized ye, fer I seen you in court when you had Walden Savern tried an' sentenced. Now, I've always admired you, I hev; you an' yer two pals make an awful team. The reg'lar detectives were fairly dumfounded by yer success when you was an amachure, an' now you're a reg'lar they admire ye. So do I!"

"Jacob, you admire me as the devil does holy water. You are a law-breaker of long service, and it's only a matter of time when you go to Sing Sing again. Just now I know of no reason why I should arrest you. Walk with me to Sixth avenue, and then you can go your way."

Chunky Jake was anxious to get sight of his prey again, but he could not afford to despise such an offer of freedom. He went, whining assertions of innocence which were all the more notable because, when things were going his way, he was one of the boldest, roughest and most blustering of New York's criminals.

After parting with him Jim Royal walked up Greenwich avenue toward Stumps's place of abode. Each of the celebrated Three Spotters had quarters in a different place, and Bobby Blossom lived with his parents. Stumps had three modest rooms on Greenwich avenue and cared for Bertina, who was under the joint guardianship of the three—though no papers to that effect ever had been made out.

On his arrival Jim found his friends eagerly awaiting him.

"New case fer The Three Spotters!" Bobby cried.

"Sure?"

"Sure-pop! It's so myater'us, too, it will be a reg'lar duel in the dark!"

"Let me hear it."

Irrepressible Bobby constituted himself spokesman, and the story was soon told.

"Now, then, do we loan Bert fer the job?" Bobby added.

"That's for Bertina to say, not us," Royal reminded.

"I'll go, gladly," she agreed, "an' if I don't like it I can come back."

"Of course; and you may do much good there. At present it is not a detective case, but, as Bobby says, a duel in the dark. We will see if it will grow."

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERIES STRANGELY UNITE.

FIVE days later.

Mrs. Madeline Gray sat in her garret room, engaged in sewing, and by her side was Blonde Bert. There had been silence between them, but Mrs. Gray finally ceased work and looked closely at her companion.

"Bertina," she spoke, "are you satisfied, here?"

"How can I be otherwise when you are so good ter me?" was the quick answer.

"And you are happy?"

"Yes."

"I am glad to hear that, for since you came into my life it has been far, far happier than before. I have some one to talk to, some one to love—for, Bertina, you have won my heart. I believe Heaven, itself, sent you here. I remember how you came here first, ragged, hungry and down-hearted, and said you had seen my face at the window, and, being impressed by it, had sought my aid to save you from starvation."

Honest Bertina's face flushed. She despised a lie, and even in a good cause, deception was something she shrunk from. It had been for Mrs. Gray's good, and for that alone, she had made her way to the garret and told the fictitious story, but, though they had found mutual happiness from the meeting, she could not look upon the deceit with composure.

"I took you in," pursued the lady, "and the act has proved a blessing to me. How much of a blessing—can you guess its full extent?"

"No."

"Had you not come, I should be dead, now!" Despite the warning of circumstances Bertina could not avoid a nervous start.

"Oh! don't say that!" she exclaimed.

"It is true. I have told you of my former rash attempt at suicide, and my promise to Mr. Leonard, but I feel that I should not have kept that promise; solitude and thought would have sent me to the roof again."

"Dear friend, why should you feel so?"

"Trouble, child; trouble."

"But what is your trouble?"

"Don't ask me; I cannot tell. There is much of woe, of horror, in my life. I never shall be like other women again, but I hope to endure life until my Creator sees fit to remove me, and to be content with my lot. That this is so, that I am so hopeful, is all due to you."

Bertina felt that she had indeed, done great good by coming to the garret, but where was it to end? She could not remain there always. Before she came, Gus Leonard had seen Detective Royal and had a long talk with him. Acting with the best of motives he had told Jim he would pay well to have the mystery of Mrs. Gray's past life solved, as he felt sure she had suffered wrongs which ought to be avenged; and in order to give Jim a clew, Bertina had several times delicately and deftly tried to win the widow's confidence, but in vain.

Mrs. Gray had kindly evaded all attempts to gain knowledge of past events.

On the present occasion, conversation was interrupted by the entrance of Gus Leonard. He had grown to be a frequent visitor. After he had saved Mrs. Gray's life she could not very well ignore him, and as he was a sensible, modest and manly gentleman, she did not try.

He came often and, at the widow's request, consented to share her interest in Bertina, but neither the latter nor Leonard had betrayed the fact that they knew more of each other, though the young girl was, as he expressed it, doubly his *protegee*.

"I am going out," he now said, lightly. "Do you want anything from Tiffany's?"

"Nothing, to-day," Mrs. Gray replied, smiling.

"I would not mind ordering a few hundred dollars' worth of diamonds. I have the cash here; thirty-four cents, all told," and he jingled the coins merrily.

"Mr. Leonard, I wish you would let me loan you something."

"Mrs. Gray, I am as proud as Lucifer; a stiff-necked beggar who would not borrow enough to buy a drink of whisky. Therefore, count me an extraordinary beggar. I am going to see the wealthy relative who objects to my being an ungentlemanly cowboy, but would let me die a gentlemanly beggar in New York. Her taste is execrable; so is my faculty for making money. Still, I stagger on without recourse to strong drink for momentum."

Leonard's good humor never failed, and his repeated jokes about his rich relative left Mrs. Gray in doubt as to the actual state of affairs, but his remarks on the subject were always in line with the facts.

He was hard up, financially, although he tried his best to earn his living in various ways, and under his light talk was pride which, really, prevented him from becoming a borrower.

After half an hour in the garret, on this occasion, he went out.

Shortly after Bertina went to the roof. Her errand was not the same that had taken Mrs. Gray there on a previous occasion, but the place like the roof of many another house in Gotham, saw a good deal of business done in its limits, especially on wash-day; and the girl now went to hang out a few articles to be aired.

When she descended the ladder she heard a man's voice in the attic.

At first she thought Leonard had returned, but one view of the man dispelled that idea. Who was it? It was generally understood that Mrs. Gray never had company.

At the point where Blonde Bert stood she could look into the room without being seen in return, and as the man partially turned she made a surprising discovery.

It was Ezra Otis!

Her surprise was marked, for she never had expected to see him again, but this was nothing compared with the wonder of beholding him in Madeline Gray's room. Without knowing just why, she was astonished to find they were acquaintances.

Both were standing, engaged in conversation, and their manner was so peculiar as to arrest and hold Bertina's attention. Ezra Otis was speaking rapidly, dramatically, but in a subdued voice, and frequent gestures marked his speech.

Placed there as she had been, Bert would have been a curiosity if she had neglected to avail herself of this conversation. With the best of motives she took occasion to overhear what was said. She advanced nearer.

Otis, more seedy and dilapidated looking than ever, was speaking:

"Have you no regard for my reputation?" he demanded, excitedly.

"Heaven knows, I have!" cried Mrs. Gray.

"You do not show it."

"But you don't know."

"I know my peril; I know you can save me."

"I wish it was as you say, but I am bound down, I am helpless."

"Why will you talk like that when a poor wretch stands before you, imploring your aid? Look at me! See my vile exterior; see my wretched clothing, my unshaven face, my squalor. Do not these appeal to you when you remember what I was?"

Mrs. Gray clasped her hands, and her voice was broken as she almost moaned:

"They do, they do; but I am helpless."

"Helpless! And what of me?"

There was bitter reproach in the visitor's voice as he spoke, and he suddenly drew himself more erect and went on vehemently:

"See what I am, and consider what a word from you would make me. It is in your power to save or to ruin me. Every moment I tread the streets of New York is one of peril for me, but, as there is safety for me nowhere, I am here—here, where danger is the most imminent. Daring all, I came to the city determined to find you. It looked like a wild, a hopeless quest; for I knew not even that you were here, but I came as the last resort. I searched through block after block, looking for you with one eye; for danger, with the other. At last I saw you at your window, here."

He paused for a moment, while Bertina thought how odd it was that he should have discovered Mrs. Gray in the way she pretended to have seen her.

"I came in," Otis resumed, presently, "hoping to be saved. What is my fate?"

He folded his arms and stood looking at her fixedly, awaiting the answer. It was hard to say which was the most moved, or which exhibited the most mental agony, but in the widow's manner was a nervousness which he crushed down within himself.

"Heaven pity you!" she brokenly said.

"Heaven," he returned, with deliberate announcement, "has left all to you. It is for you to ruin or to save. What is your verdict? Will you save me?"

"I cannot, I cannot!"

"Then let this settle it!"

With a quick motion he drew a revolver and clapped it to his temple, but swifter than his movements were her own. She sprung forward, seized the weapon and turned it away.

"No, no!" she cried, wildly; "you must not; you shall not!"

"Release your hold, woman; I tell you I will die!"

"Rather let that be my fate! Turn the revolver upon me; cover my heart, and fire with unshaking hand!"

"You do not deserve death—you must live to suffer. My life ends here!"

Again he tried to raise the weapon, but she clung to him yet more tenaciously.

"You shall not; you shall not! Let me die, instead!"

"You are logical. You would die, but you would not speak. But I know how sincere you are; you value your life as a Mohammedan does

his religion; it is all to you. Live, then, live! Your punishment may come."

He cast her violently from him, and deliberately put the revolver into his pocket. Stony calmness had settled upon him.

"Your advice shall be taken," he heeded. "I'll not meddle at all with the progress of events, at present, but rely upon this: If I am molested, I will do that which will make New York ring with the horror of the deed. This revolver is still mine!"

"Forbear! forbear!"

"Do I shock your fine sensibilities?"

The bitter sneer in his voice touched her to the quick, and she suddenly fell upon her knees and raised her clasped hands to him.

"Hear me!" she exclaimed; "hear me, and believe, when I swear that I cannot tell what you ask. It is beyond my ability, and the same inexorable power that crushes you down crushes me, also. Believe me, every trouble I have, and they are thick and black as the thunder-clouds of heaven, are but shadows of your own misfortunes. You are the cause of it all—the innocent cause, for you are not more responsible than I. This is the truth; I swear it!"

Ezra Otis put his hand to his head in bewilderment.

He gazed at the woman, he heard her voice, and would have been callous as rock to have met the vehement assertion with outspoken unbelief.

"This is amazing!" he finally muttered.

"It is true."

"You—you are crushed by the same power?"

"Crushed, hunted, driven to desperation!"

"The devils were not all drowned with the swine in the sea."

"The devils of to-day are too cunning for that."

His gaze wandered to a roll of bank-notes on the table.

"You are not living in poverty."

"I would welcome poverty; ay, I would bless the hour which put me in the poor-house, if I could be free from the curse. But since I am under the evil spell I am glad I have means of living. Money I have; enough to supply all my wants, to-day and henceforth."

"Yet, you live in a garret."

"What safer place for the hunted to hide? Oh! you know not what I have endured! I have kept my room like a veritable prisoner; I have avoided my kind, and refused the association of those kind of heart; I have started at the sound of a human voice, and shivered at the rustle of a garment. You do not know—"

"I know it all!" cried Otis. "All three things have been my lot. Hagar in the wilderness was more fortunate than I; she was condemned, but the wilderness covered her. I linger among human beasts of prey; I shiver at the human voice, or footstep, or glance. I know! Yet, I had hoped you could help me."

"Heaven pity us both, I can tell nothing."

"Then my one hope is gone!"

"Say not so. Hope, hope!"

"Hope is gone, since you can do nothing."

Hope died when help was denied."

Suddenly Mrs. Gray sprung to her feet.

"One thing I can do: you shall share my plenty, if nothing more. Here, here is money! Take it, and may God bless you! Take it—"

But Ezra Otis recoiled, putting out both hands before him.

"No, no; not one penny. It would burn my hands; it would sear my soul. Farewell!"

He turned and fled from the room. Heavily his steps sounded on the stairs, and then he was gone.

CHAPTER VI.

A TIME OF TERROR.

As the days passed, and Blonde Bert failed to get any information from Mrs. Gray, Jim Royal foresaw failure in that attempt and looked around for a fresh hold.

In the long interview with Gus Leonard, when the latter had formally employed Spotter Jim—promising to pay him when he could—the ex-cowboy had stated his position in these words:

"Above all I wish you to understand I am not an idle meddler. A man who would annoy a woman like her is a contemptible creature. This is my position: Mrs. Gray has trouble so serious that she grew desperate enough to attempt her own life, yet she will not tell what the trouble is. I want to save her in spite of herself; to remove the trouble that has once led her to attempt suicide, and is liable—nay, more than likely—to lead her to that rash step again. Can we save her? Let us try. Let us learn her

secret, and then, if we cannot help her, we will bury it forever from sight."

Convinced that Gus was sincere, Royal took the detective job, and Bertina went to Mrs. Gray's.

Her reports brought no news.

Jim saw he must work in another way.

"I know the landlord," he observed, to Stumps, one morning, "and I'll see if he can help me."

"Not a hopeful outlook."

"It can be tried, however."

He went to the landlord and opened the conversation.

"Mrs. Gray? Oh! yes; she has the garret-room. A ladylike woman who makes an excellent tenant. Prompt pay; no broils; no complaints. Has been with me for several months."

"Have you got well acquainted with her?"

"Quite the reverse. You see, I have five houses, and never visit the tenants except on pay-day, once a month. The janitor of each building does the rest."

"From what place did Mrs. Gray come when she moved into your house?"

"Well, that's the mystery!"

"Mystery?"

"Nothing less; I don't know where she did come from. But if you want to know just how much we can tell you about her, go to my friend Gordon, of Tenth street. He knows all I do, and much on top of it. I'll give you a note which will O. K. you, and then he will tell you a striking story."

The landlord scratched off the note, and Royal took it and went to Mr. Gordon.

The latter was a gentleman past his fiftieth year, but a very hale and hearty man. His hair was decidedly gray, and made a striking contrast to his red face; while his eyes were singularly bright. His room looked like an arsenal. Guns, rifles, revolvers, knives and powder flasks were there in abundance; and there, too, was a mounted deer, a panther, and several specimens of the fowl family.

He received Royal cordially, but hesitated when he read the note. Evidently he did not approve of his friend's suggestion that he talk freely to the visitor, but, after some conversation, he decided that it was safe.

"I hesitated only for the sake of the lady in the case, and I am persuaded that you would not be knave enough to worry an unfortunate, worthy woman."

"Decidedly not," Jim agreed.

"You shall hear the story, sir. First of all, look around this room. What does it suggest?"

"That you are an ardent sportsman."

"That's just what I am. Don't think me a crank, sir. The mounted creatures all fell by my own hand, and the weapons—why, every one is for use, and in the best of condition. But to business:

"Just before I took the lady to her present landlord I went out hunting, alone, as usual, in the woods of New Jersey." He mentioned the exact place and went on:

"One afternoon I was walking along quietly, rifle in hand, when I heard the baying of dogs. My own canine companions, of which I had two, pricked up their ears, but I gave the matter hardly a thought.

"Supposing a fellow hunter had struck a trail and had his dogs on it I calmly pursued my way. I did not want to monkey with the other hunter's game, and, as we bade fair to meet, or nearly meet, at the right-angled junction of our trails, I would have made a detour had it not been for the nature of the ground.

"The region was swampy, and only by holding to my course could I find decent walking.

"I kept on, and all the while the unseen dogs drew nearer to me. I knew they were of the first rank as hunters, for my experienced ears told me they were making a hot chase of it, and holding tenaciously to the game.

"I make it a rule never to meddle with other hunters, but, as the dogs got so near I caught the hunting fever and grew curious as to the nature of the game.

"Finally I reached a long, deep pool, and, knowing they must soon break from cover, paused. Almost at once game and dogs appeared, and I tell you it was the worst shock of my life.

"Out from the bushes came a woman who ran at full speed, but that was not saying so very much. With her flesh scratched and the clothing almost torn from her back by the bushes; pursued at full speed until almost every atom of strength was gone; run for her life and yet finding it slipping away, she staggered like one intoxicated.

"And in the rear, close to her now, came the dogs—fierce, strong animals which, to my

would have seemed noble brutes had they been after legitimate game, but were now veritable devils.

"I could hardly believe what I saw.

"A woman hunted by dogs within a hundred miles of New York!

"It was horrible!

"While I stood incapable of motion the crisis came. The poor fugitive reached treacherous ground and went down, mired to her waist and helpless, and the dogs leaped upon her. Their great white teeth gleamed in the red expanse of their open jaws, and those jaws were opened to seize, to rend her flesh.

"She uttered a despairing cry of horror.

"The end seemed near at hand, for the brutes were mad for blood.

"I thank Heaven that I roused from my stupor of dismay, and that woman has cause to be thankful that long experience in the woods had made the moment of firing at game the coolest of my life.

"My splendid repeating rifle—that's the weapon on the wall, yonder—was in my hands. It sprang to my shoulder; the bore menaced the greediest dog; I pulled the trigger. Ay; twice I fired, and I sent no bullet in vain.

"When I lowered the rifle the two dogs lay dead on the form of the woman.

"I rushed around the pool; I dashed forward with long steps. Now, indeed, there was fever in my blood—ay, it ran like molten lava through my veins. Was she dead or living? She gave no sign.

"I reached the spot; I found a log which made safe footing; I cast off the dead dogs in mad haste. She stirred; she opened her eyes; she raised her white arms; she piteously whispered:

"Save me! save me!"

"I know not what I said, but with a giant's strength I lifted her from the foul mass of mud and water, and bore her to dry land. I laid her down there. She had fainted. I raised her head on my knee, and I poured down her throat a drink of as pure brandy as New York ever saw.

"All along I had suspected that the dogs had not run the game on their own responsibility, and I found proof of it, then. Along her left side was a mark where a bullet, passing between her arm and body, had cut a gash in her dress for inches.

"Think of it! think of it!—but, thank Heaven, there was not even a crease on the skin.

"I think I blubbered then like an old fool, Mr. Royal. I had a daughter of about the same age as this woman, and I imagined her hunted by dogs, set on by human fiends, and it was too much for me.

"Presently she recovered, starting up in terror.

"Save me! save me!" she again gasped.

"Then I set to work to reassure her, but it was no easy task. I did it, at last, in a measure. I told her the dogs were dead, and that she was safe in my care. The men did not appear. I don't know, even now, who they were.

"She admitted they had set the dogs on her, and had fired upon her, but she would say no more. Grateful as woman could be she was, but when I asked her to explain all, so I could avenge her wrongs, she would only say:

"Don't ask me, for I cannot tell!"

CHAPTER VII.

CHUNKY JAKE'S NIGHT FORAY.

THE narrator paused and looked at vacancy as he, in imagination, still saw Mrs. Gray and heard her make the assertion.

"And you've never obtained any light?" questioned Jim Royal.

"None whatever."

"Why do you suppose she was so brutally used?"

"I don't know; certainly, I don't believe it was because of any fault of hers. I found her a mild, amiable woman, and I'll swear I believe no harm of her. She admitted that enemies had pursued her, fired at her and set the dogs on her, but further than that she spoke not of the past. As to the future, when I asked where she wished to go, she cried out, sharply: 'Oh! get me a place somewhere, anywhere, so I can hide forever!'

"And you suggested her present quarters."

"Yes. I know of no place this side of the North Pole where one can hide so effectually as in our own great city. Yes; I attended to the business and saw Mrs. Gray safely domiciled where she is, but I never have bothered her with visits, for, grateful as she was, I fancied she wished to be left alone."

Here ended his information, but James Royal went away more than ever anxious to aid Mrs. Gray. Every one united in the opinion that she was a victim of wrong rather than a doer of evil, and though the detective was shrewd enough to see that there was something she dared not tell, it would have given him pleasure to right her wrongs.

That evening Bertina called and told Jim of the visit, a few hours before, of Ezra Otis to Mrs. Gray.

"After he went away she just got down on her knees and prayed," Bert explained, "though I didn't hear a word she said. I don't know but I ought ter gone in right away, but I felt so bad fer her I couldn't; an' when I did go, an' said kinder careless that she had had a visitor, she never let on a thing."

Royal was silent.

The mystery of the duel in the dark deepened. Mrs. Gray and Otis, both persons of mystery, but, it appeared, of such qualities as to impress every one favorably, had met under circumstances which proved, whatever had been the troubles which had so environed them, that their past ran together, and that the life-drama of the one was intermingled with that of the other.

But what was the mystery, and where lay the key to the past?

"If Otis comes again," Royal directed, "let me or Bobby know at once. I believe I can wrest some part of the truth from him, if I can locate him."

Bertina promised, and then went back to the garret, while Jim held a conference on the subject with Stumps and Bobby.

Theories were plentiful, though it was impossible to say whether any one of them touched the facts. When they separated they were as wide from the clew as ever.

That night Royal retired as usual, but, before seeking his bed, he took from a miniature easel on the bureau a cabinet photograph and stood looking at it for several minutes.

It represented Mrs. Gray, was one of a quantity she had kept in her room, and had been brought to Royal by Gus Leonard with the idea of impressing the detective favorably.

The plan had not failed.

"A good face!" Jim commented, as he put the picture back in its place. "It was taken when she was happier than now. I would give something to know what has happened to her since she faced the artist."

He went to bed, and was soon asleep.

Hours passed.

The detective dreamed he was in the Jersey woods, and saw a woman who was hunted by a beast, but the beast was a panther, and its advance was slow. He crept near his victim, and the soft patter of his footsteps sounded in Jim's ears, causing fright.

The dreamer awoke, and was not long in realizing that all this had been unsubstantial matter, but while he lay in thought, not having moved, a sound reached his hearing which recalled the imaginary step of the panther.

A footfall, soft and low!

And in his room!

He was about to start up and challenge the intruder, but controlled himself in time. Very slowly and gently he raised his hand to the pillow and secured his revolver. He dared not cock it, but he held it ready so that a moment's preparation would put him in defensive, or offensive, condition.

A little later a match was scratched with great caution, and then some one coolly lighted the gas. Royal, looking in astonishment, saw a man of extremely muscular build, dressed even to hat, and as he partially turned his face, Jim recognized him.

It was Chunky Jake!

It flashed upon the detective that the fellow had come to revenge his discomfiture near Washington Square, but Jake did not proceed to hostilities as expected. He ran his gaze over the room as if looking for plunder.

Royal's opinion changed. Chunky Jake doubtless had satisfied himself that the occupant of the bed was asleep, but he would not be so calm if bent on revenge.

Doubtless he was at his old tricks, and acting the burglar; so Royal lay quiet, glad that circumstances brought his own face into shadow.

His clothes were lifted by the intruder, who went through the pockets with more deftness than success, and then, tossing them on the floor, he moved toward the bureau. His hand sought the dangling ball that operated the top drawer, but, at that stage of affairs, he paused and ran his gaze over the articles on top.

He was after plunder, and none was there, but

he saw that which suddenly impressed him. His hand fell to his side, and he started back. His face, plainly revealed to Jim, expressed that which surprised the observer.

Chunky Jim was in terror. Why?

Royal could not imagine what article was there to so impress him, and his own interest increased.

A moment, and then Chunky Jake smiled—a kind of apologetic smile, as if he felt ashamed of some weakness and was trying to convince himself no weakness had been felt.

He put out a big, hairy hand, and lifted Mrs. Gray's picture!

If he had been reckless in his disregard of danger before, he was more so now. He moved boldly to the gas and looked at the pictured face. He turned it in first one position and then another, surveying it critically. His first emotion had betrayed the fact that it had been recognized, and Jim was curious to see what would follow.

Suddenly the picture was raised and pressed to the bearded lips. Then he held it off and, grinning and grimacing in fancied humor, bowed to it deeply.

This clown-play went on for some time, but he seemed suddenly to remember where he was. Quickly he turned toward the bed.

It had been Jim Royal's plan to feign sleep if Jake came to look at him, and give the fellow full swing before arresting him, but he was taken off his guard. Their eyes met, and secrecy was no longer possible. Swiftly the former rose to a sitting posture in the bed, and his ready revolver was brought to bear on the burglar.

"Hands up, Chunky Jake!" the Spotter-detective exclaimed. "I want you!"

The law-breaker plainly had another start. He gazed at Royal in dismay.

"You here!" he exclaimed.

"Right here, Jacob. Didn't you know it?"

"Old Jule Caesar! no; I thought 'twas a common man. Why, dash it, I'd as soon gone inter a lion's den as your room; I would, b' thunder!"

"Why so?"

"Cause you're bad medicine," was the frank reply.

"Have I ever done you harm?"

"No."

"I'm going to begin! You have entered my room at the dead of night, and I have a suspicion that if you had known who was here I never should have awakened. I don't like your way, Jacob, and propose to stop your prowling. Consider yourself my prisoner. If you try to run away I shall 'wing' you."

"Drat it all! you're hard on a feller!"

"Such an inoffensive person may well make the complaint, but it's my way. What are you doing with that picture?"

"I? Eh? Oh! I didn't know I had it. Beg yer pardon!" and Jake put it down.

"Where is the original of that likeness, now?" the detective asked, tersely and peremptorily.

"Where? Oh! Lord, I don't know; I never heard o' her, nor saw her, in my life."

"You are lying, Jake, and you know it. First sight of that picture gave you a shock. Why? Come! this is a confessional, and a statement is in order."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE EVIDENCE OF THE LETTER.

CHUNKY JAKE was by no means reconciled to the state of affairs, and ever and anon his gaze wandered from Jim Royal and around the room, as if he were looking for a hole to dodge out of, but the revolver kept him in place.

Whatever emotion had been aroused by the picture was gone, and he wished himself far away from it.

"Now, I dunno why you should git sech an idee inter yer head," he complained. "I jest looked at the thing because I admire female beauty—"

"Why will you lie?" Royal sternly interrupted.

"I don't."

"It is false! You have seen that woman."

"Never, boss; never."

"Your guilty start, and interest, betrayed it."

"Now, boss—"

"Come here, Jake!"

The order gave the burglar another start. The tone showed him that Spotter Jim meant business and was not to be trifled with. It showed more. Jake knew that, if his companion had his way, old, familiar haunts and himself would resume former ways before the sun again touched the meridian; in other words, Chunky Jake would be in a police cell. Now,

this he had determined should not be, and the weakness in his nature had been so crowded to the rear by the bulldog element that he was bound to escape or risk death.

The detective's last words showed that the crisis was at hand, and the fellow developed valor worthy of a better cause.

Stooping suddenly he caught up a chair which had a stout, wooden seat, and one sweep carried it before his face as a shield, while a bending of his back made the chair a protection for far more than his person.

Thus armored he began to retreat backward toward the door, and Jim Royal saw he was in danger of losing his prisoner. With one leap the detective gained the floor and started in pursuit, while Jake put back one hand and opened the door.

Royal could at any time have put a bullet through his leg, but this was not a part of his programme. Anxious to bring him to bay at the revolver's muzzle he overtook him and grasped the chair.

With matters thus peculiarly situated an accident occurred.

Chunky Jake forgot to lift his feet at the door, and the inevitable result followed. He tripped over the threshold, and, in some way neither ever could clearly understand, pulled Jim forward. The burglar fell, and Jim dropped on top of him, crushing the chair as he went down.

It was a point scored for Jake; he could meet his enemy on equal terms.

A great breath welled up from his lungs to express his satisfaction, and he wrapped his arms around the detective.

"I've got yer, cuss yer!" he exclaimed.

Quickly Royal tried to writhe away. He had lost the revolver, and it was no desirable job to meet the big, gladiator-like criminal on even terms—he writhed, but in vain. Jake held fast.

"I've got yer!" he repeated, exultantly.

His strong hand caught Royal's throat, and murder was in his heart, but he had no passive victim. Jim wrenched the hostile hand away, and then began a struggle as fierce as it was rapid. The burglar's chief fear was that his adversary would call for help and alarm the lodgers who were near, but as this was not done, savage joy filled Jake's mind.

"He dies right here!" was the thought of the ruffian.

He had no doubt of his ability to carry out the plan. He was much heavier, much stronger than Royal, and had full confidence in his brute prowess. Surely no boy—even a muscular "boy" of twenty like the Spotter—could stand against him.

He sought to end it quickly, but was somewhat surprised at the result.

Whenever he gained a good hold Jim glided snake-like out of it, and in return he received a hold which told of steel-like muscles on his adversary's part. In fact, the big bravo quickly found he had met a singularly able foe.

The fact angered him, and he greeted each futile attempt with muttered curses, but they were even less effective than his other efforts.

Where was all his strength? He wondered over the fact, and worked himself into a fever. To be successfully resisted by a mere youth—it was a disgrace to his manhood, and something he could not endure tamely. Something must be done—but what? What could he do? Circumstances had forced upon him the amazing fact that he had met a man as good as himself.

How was he to gain the advantage?

Seeing only one plan he fell back upon it.

For a moment he ceased operations until he could get his right arm wholly at liberty. Upon that brawny member he would rely. He would strike Jim in the face; he would disable him from further work; he would stun him and effect his own escape; he would smash—

The New York tough would never recognize himself if he did not bring the word "smash" into every trouble. Jake used it, now, in his unspoken plan of operations.

Then he proceeded to "smash."

He swung his arm and tried to get in the blow, but, half-way, the arm was arrested by some coil that had been stealthily wrapped around it, and he found Jim's own arm in the way.

"I have you, Jacob!" Jim exclaimed.

"Nary hev, critter!" Jake panted.

"You weaken; you tremble; you are faint!"

Faint!

Burly Jake could forgive almost anything—he had himself said so—but *that*? Could he forgive an insult so vile? It was maddening. *He, faint?* He, swoon like a silly school-girl whose

chest-diameter was about equal to that of one of his ponderous arms?

"Cuss yer!" he snarled, "you won't never say that ag'in. I'll kill yer! I'll smash—"

But now Royal swung him over, and the fellow saw all his plans and his future going to ruin together. This amazing boy was proving a veritable wonder, and the Goliath in the case was the under dog in the fight, in a double sense.

Realizing that he must move at once or take his next sleep behind the bars, the bravo collected all his strength for a final effort.

He moved, and his muscles swelled with the attempt. Again the contestants rolled about rapidly and furiously, and neither could gain a decisive hold, but Jake felt that it was a losing cause for him again.

Unluckily for Royal a turn of his body momentarily bent one of his legs so as to give him a sharp pain, and his hold unconsciously relaxed. It was a chance Jake did not fail to improve.

He twisted away and sprung partially to his feet, and though his enemy's muscles at once contracted again, his grasp was on Jake's coat only. Then the burglar tried to break away, but in vain. But he thought he heard some one else moving, and a new idea came to him.

With a single contortion he slipped entirely out of the coat, and, leaving the garment in Jim's grasp, sprung away in haste.

He had reason to believe there was a way for him to get out of the house as he had come in, and he was eager to do it. His entrance had been purely burglarious, for he had not known that Spotter Jim lived there until he saw him sitting up in bed, revolver in hand, and now he did not aspire to look for plunder.

The detective was on his feet in a moment, but was seriously handicapped.

His late opponent had fled in the darkness, and he had no means of knowing toward what point he had gone. Jim made pursuit, but the result proved that he was too late; a window was open, and Chunky Jake was gone.

Accepting the result as philosophically as possible, Jim fastened the window and returned to his room. Remembering, however, that he had gained a trophy in the form of the burglar's coat he went to the hall and secured that article. At first it did not seem to be very interesting, for it partook of the slovenly nature of its owner, but in one pocket the searcher came upon a letter, sealed and stamped, and ready for mailing.

It was addressed to "Mowbrey Elwell, No. — Sixtieth street, New York," and the Spotter decided that it might be worth reading.

He calmly broke it open, and perused the following scholarly production:

"NEW YORK, 18th, to-day.

"MISTER MOWBREY ELWELL, E SQUARE.

"SUR:—I take plazure in riting to yu to say that i hav a mater uv importance to bring to yore atention. yu wil rekunize me az a man yu hav had dealings with in the passed, i helped yu about maddylin, yu no yu pade me like wan jent'eman shud another, wick we ar, and though i hav fownd out yore reel name i should skorn to akt the bla' malar, i an't that kind, sur. i am a Square Man, but i hav that to say wich i kno wil bee uv interest to yu.

"There iz a person in this sitty that yu o't to no about. i don't think she iz a proper person to hav att large. i did think uv ritin' to poleace head Quarterz about itt, but i had jest az so. n they wood knot see my hand ritin'. See?

"this f'ur G'in' above iz a goke.

"now to bizziniss. i hav seen maddylin'. she iz in ny york, to. i don't no jest where she livs, but no about the place wich is near 14 street, and will find her if yu say the word. i want to urn an on'st penny, and i gess yu wil pay to git site uv her ag'in. how iz it?

"If yu want to higher me, dropp a lyn to the pos toffs adress i giv heer, an' let me no there is munny init four us both, and i am a man that kan bee d pended On.

"Yores respeckabell.

"GAKOB GREEN.

"*commonly called chunky Galk.*"

If Mr. Green's spelling was erratic it was, nevertheless, not a rival to his penmanship. Big, broad marks were sprawled here and there in confusion, and to read it was about as difficult as it had been for him to write.

Spotter Jim had made a discovery!

CHAPTER IX.

GETTING AT THE SECRET.

THE detective's mind at once reached out to grasp the clew which seemed in his grasp. Chunky Jake had written of a woman who lived "near 14 street," and whose name was "maddylin." It was but natural that he should think of Madeline Gray, who lived on Thirteenth street, and though he had not known

that Jake had any knowledge of her, corroborative evidence was almost at his elbow.

There lay Mrs. Gray's picture where the burglar had thrown it down, and his conduct at sight of it had not been forgotten.

"Maddylin' is Madeline," was the ready decision, "and if the Madeline of this case is not Mrs. Gray, then Chunky Jake's emotion is very deceptive."

The Spotter believed he had found the desired thread which, followed, would lead up to the web, and the principal question now became, who was Mowbrey Elwell?

"I don't know, but I intend to find out, tomorrow," he declared, as he returned to bed.

He obtained but little more sleep that night, and had an early breakfast. Going from there to a drug-store he found a directory and, in it, this record:

"Elwell, Mowbrey; president Marlstone National Bank; house, — Sixtieth street."

Royal's eyes brightened.

"President of a bank, eh? Now, I think I shall be able to learn more about him in a short time. I will see to it at once."

He had a friend who moved in the dizzy whirl of Wall street, and as it was too early for him to be at his office, it was probable he was at home. That he was there was proved when Jim arrived.

"Well, this is an early call, Royal," remarked the financier, "but you are just as welcome. Sit and smoke with me until I go out."

"I'm inclined to think I shall go first, for I have come on business—"

"Fire ahead!"

"Do you know the president of the Marlstone Bank?"

"Mowbrey Elwell? Yes, and no; I know him by sight, and always bow to him when we meet, but when you speak of acquaintance, I can't say I am in it."

"What do you know about him?"

"Well, Elwell cuts quite a swath in the money world, but rumor says he leaves a ragged stubble. Time was when he was a big gun, but neither he nor his bank stands very high to-day. There were rumors, last winter, that the institution was not on firm footing, but they seem to have weathered the gale; I know their credit is better than then, though not A1. There is lack of confidence in Elwell, and in his bank."

"So much for him as a business man. What do you know of him as a private individual?"

"Less, far less, almost nothing. I don't know where he lives, or what family he has. I do know he once had a son, Piercey Elwell, who died when about thirty years of age. He was a very different man, I assure you."

"Well liked, I take it?"

"Yes, by everybody. He must have got his good qualities from his mother, I think. He was a frank, honest, manly fellow who inspired business and social confidence. He was very young, you see, but he built up the credit of M. Elwell & Son—they were in business, then—wonderfully. When he died the business went to the dogs. There was no failure, but it was common talk that old Mowbrey did not take a dollar more out of the business than he put in when he and Piercey started. If true, that meant a shrinkage of upward of a hundred thousand dollars, sure."

"When did Piercey die?"

"About four years ago."

"Was he married?"

"Yes."

"Is his wife living?"

"I haven't the least idea. He was spoken of as a married man, and that is all I know about it. But, see here, Royal, you can do better than to question me."

"What?"

"Go to Fifty-seventh street and see a friend of mine. He don't like old Mowbrey and will tell all the mean things he knows about the old man. On the other hand, he will not lie about Elwell, or anybody else; you can rely upon what he says. Go, by all means!"

Jim went, and again found a ready talker.

"Yes, I know old Mowbrey," was the frank reply to his question, after his standing had been established, "but I kn w no good of him. Am I talking in confidence?"

"Decidedly, yes."

"Well, Mowbrey Elwell is a rascal, and the world is going to find it out, some day. I expect him to wreck the Marlstone Bank, though I hope *that* won't come."

"Has he ever been caught in business crookedness?"

"No, or he would not be at the head of the bank. Still, he is under suspicion by many

men. A devious old twister is Elwell. I wouldn't trust him with a counterfeit dollar!"

"What family has he?"

"Only an old maid sister, now Piercey Elwell is dead."

"But Piercey's widow?"

"Said to be in Europe."

"Why do you put emphasis on the word 'said'?"

"Because I don't know about it. She is gone somewhere; has been gone over two years; but I won't swear she is sojourning among our cousins of British, French, German, or other blood. I have always thought there was a mystery about Madeline Elwell."

"About whom, sir?"

"Piercey's wife was named Madeline. As I was going to say, I've always thought there was something very odd about her departure from New York."

"Why so?"

"Because she was as popular as Piercey had been, and, though a resident of the vicinity for only a short time, comparatively, when she went away it was without bidding any one good-bye."

"How do you account for that?" Jim asked.

His companion shook his head and said nothing.

"You don't suspect anything wrong?" continued the Spotter.

"Mr. Royal, I don't know what to think. I hate Mowbrey Elwell, and say so frankly, but I don't want to do him injustice. Consider the case, and judge for yourself: Do you think a young, charming woman, social, refined, amiable and popular, would run away between two days, as I may say, and not tell her best friend? A man might do it, out of eccentricity; a true woman, never!"

"Was she wealthy?"

"Not in her own right; she was a Connecticut girl, report said, and without means."

"But as the widow of Piercey Elwell?"

"It is said by honest men who ought to know that her share of his property remained in the firm and was about wiped out by its shrinkage; but that she stated she was fully paid her just due, and had the money in a safe place, where only she could get at it. Oh! I don't think her money got her into trouble!"

"Was she in trouble?"

"If not, why did she go away thus? But did she go so suddenly because of trouble which she knew of, or did some other trouble come unexpectedly? To put it more plainly, did she run away, or was she stolen away?"

The suggestions thus thrown out so impressed Jim Royal that he was silent. Presently the former speaker added:

"I don't know but I do a criminal act in giving words to my thoughts, but I never have been prepared to believe that Mowbrey Elwell told the truth when he said that Madeline had gone to Europe."

"If it was not a money matter, why should he lie, or wish to get her out of the way?"

"I can't say, and that is why I feel that I am to blame for speaking thus. Believe me, though I have always spoken my opinion of Elwell as a business man with frankness, I am not in the habit of tattling, nor have I ever wantonly injured his reputation, but often have I asked myself: Did young Mrs. Elwell go away because she was in trouble, or did her father-in-law hustle her away because she was in his way?"

The speaker had put a suggestive question, and he would have been more impressed by it, himself, if he had heard what Jim could tell.

The detective was now convinced, in the light of Chucky Jake's letter, and other matters, that Madeline Elwell and Madeline Gray were one.

He asked other questions of his companion, but the latter had told all he could, and, presently, Royal went away, meditating deeply on what he had heard.

CHAPTER X.

THE REVOLVER-MAN.

"Hi! Benny, old chap, how be you?"

The speaker was Bobby Blossom, and he had walked up to a boy of his own age and slapped him on the back in a friendly way.

"Hi! that you, Bobby?" was the reply. "Why, I ain't seen you in a month."

"Don't git inter friverlous society much, now," Mr. Blossom gravely returned.

"Be you still a detective?"

"That's my line," Bobby returned, with dignity.

"Jiminy! but don't I wish I's one, too!"

"Wal, ef you don't git in public life, mebbe you'll make yer mark som'ers else. W'ot's your line?"

"I'm an errand boy. I've jist been in here on biz."

He indicated the building back of them, and Bobby looked at it more closely.

"The Marlstone National Bank. Say, Benny, ef we had all the money in that place, we needn't go ter do no work."

"We ain't got it."

"No, an' it ain't likely we shall hev. We ain't bank-robbers, an' in biz, honest folks git rich slow. There is them, Benjamin, who want ter git rich at one jump, an' the fever generally turns them from the path o' righteousness. A feller with that fever is a poor critter, by gum! Better go slow an' keep in the path of honor. Eh, Benny?"

But the second boy did not answer. He was looking into the bank building with a fixedness which amounted to a stare, and, plainly, had forgotten all about Bobby.

"Yowlin' cats! w'at you see, Ben—a ghost?"

"Say, d'ye see that fat man?"

"Yes."

"I seen him do an awful funny thing, one night."

"What?"

"Shoot at a woman!"

"What! a man o' his cloth? You don't say so! Pretty biz fer sech an aristocratic swell. How was it?"

"Wal, you see I wuz over on Charles street, near Greenwich avenue, an' it was so late the street was about deserted. In fact, I thought nobody else was stirrin' there but me, but all of a sudden I heerd quick, funny steps like a woman makes when runnin'."

"Then I heerd a man's voice say, quick an' sharp: 'Madeline!' It was jist as ef he was callin' ter her in a commandin' way, ez my dad will say ter me when he calls me up ter be licked."

"I turned quick an' see a woman runnin', an' close behind her was the man. He was big an' fat, an' seemed ter know he had no show fer ketchin' her by runnin', so he says, ag'in: 'Stop, Madeline!'

"But she didn't stop fer a cent, an' then he jist jerked a revolver out o' his pocket an' raised it. Before you could say 'Scat!' he fired, an' I heerd her give a little cry, but she wa'n't hurt."

"She kept runnin' like a hero, an' she come under the wire first. He pounded along a few steps about like an ellefant, but he see he was not in it, an' he give up, turned back an' went the other way."

"Of course she got off, clean."

"Ef any perleecemen heerd the shootin' he took a sneak jist the contrary way, fer he an' nobody else didn't show up. That's all."

Bobby quickly asked:

"Be you sure the shooter was the same man who went in here?"

Benny looked surprised.

"Why, cert!" he returned.

"An' the woman? Would you know her ef you see her again?"

"I'm 'most dead sure I would."

"Wal, that's slick. Now, see here—be you busy?"

"I's ter get back at noon."

"Good! Time enough. First of all, I noticed when this coppulent gent went in, that the feller over yonder—janitor, I s'pose he is—spoke ter him meek an' humble like. He knows the coppulent gent. Moreover, I'm goin' ter find out jist who he is. Rivet yer heels ter the sidewalk fer a space o' time, Benjamin, an' I'll precipitate my anatomy through the door and catechise the janitor."

With this ponderous announcement Robert went, and soon had the attention of his man.

"General, I beg yer pardon, but who was that big man you was speakin' at a jiffy ago?"

"That," was the consequential reply, "was Mowbrey Elwell, president of the Marlstone National Bank."

"All right; much obliged."

Bobby returned to his young friend in a somewhat dazed mood. It was pretty hard to believe that a bank president would go wandering about the streets of New York, shooting at women, but it remained a fact that all the violent work done in the city was not confined to the recognized criminal classes.

The young Spotter was getting excited, and he took Benny under his wing, figuratively, and proceeded to escort him up-town somewhat. At a florist's he stopped and purchased a neat bouquet, and then went to Thirteenth street.

"Now, Benjamin," he explained, "I'm goin' in ter give these smellers to a widdier, an' I want you to see the deed done. You will go as fer as the door, an' stand there as modest an' lady-like ez you know how. See? You won't say nothin' unless she opens the cannonade,

but you will push the winkers all back from yer eyes an' look sharp ter see ef yer know her. Eh?"

"I'm on."

"Foller yer leader, then."

With his usual confident manner Robert walked into Mrs. Madeline Gray's room. She and Blonde Bert were there, engaged in sewing, and the detective presented the flowers with appropriate remarks.

He did not linger long, but, with his friend, retraced his steps to the sidewalk. There he turned sharply.

"Wal, Benjamin?"

"That's the woman!" declared Ben, with emphasis.

"The one who was shot at by Elwell?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"I'm just as sure as that I'm standin' on my trotters, now," was the confident reply. "I couldn't make no mistake. I had a good look at both o' them, ef it wuz short, an' you don't suppose I could forget her, do you? Not much! She's the one, an' you kin jist set it down fer keeps. I'd swear to it. See?"

"I think I do, Benjamin!" responded the Spotter, significantly.

He had no further use for Ben, so he parted with him soon after and went to Stumps's room. That gentleman and Jim Royal were there in earnest conversation when Bobby came in like a small whirlwind, dashed his cap down on the floor and exclaimed:

"Feller-citizens, I've got 'em!"

"Got what?" Stumps asked, a twinkle in his eyes. "Snakes?"

"Naw!" returned Bobby, in disgust. "I've got a p'inter on Madeline's case, or else I'm a perjurer. Anyhow, I've found out that she's got an enemy in the person of one Mowbrey Elwell, ter wit, namely; bank president, nabob an' fat man! He's a Thug, b'jinks!"

Royal and Stumps exchanged glances.

"Explain, Robert," the senior Spotter directed.

Bobby was not reluctant, and the story was soon told. Then followed Jim's, and the trio unanimously arrived at an opinion.

Madeline Elwell, daughter-in-law of the president of the Marlstone Bank, was not in Europe; it was a fact that, as suggested to Jim, there was trouble between her and Mowbrey; the trouble was so serious that he had once fired at her, to kill or to alarm her; and Madeline Elwell and Mrs. Gray were one.

"There ain't one chance in a hundred fer a fluke on that," Stumps decided.

"Whoopee!" cried Bobby. "The Three Spotters are in the swim again!"

"Are they?" Royal answered. "We are in the work in a peculiar way. True, Gus Leonard has employed us in due form, but Mrs. Gray has not. She has not intimated that there is crime afloat, and, probably, she would set her foot down heavily on any attempt on our part to work up the case."

"Yowlin' cats!" gasped young Mr. Blossom, "you ain't goin' ter give it up, be you?"

"Rest easy; I have no intention of it. I only want to warn you that we may get no case in court; it may end in a private settlement. Mrs. Gray has been injured by her deceased husband's father. I do not doubt that he was responsible for the awful scene when she was hunted by dogs. He even fired at her with intent to kill. Oh! don't worry, but there is reason enough for us to work, and work we will. One thing puzzles me: What connection has Ezra Otis with this case?"

CHAPTER XI.

HUNTED DOWN.

It was evening.

Bertina had been out on an errand. When she re-entered the house she saw a large man going up the first flight of stairs. As this was her own route, she followed.

He ascended the second flight, and again she followed.

But when he started up the third she stopped in surprise. This stairway led to the upper floor, and the only person who had a room there was Mrs. Gray.

"Maybe he's made a mistake—or it may be the man after the rent."

These thoughts were natural, for Mrs. Gray never received any visitors who were unknown to Bertina. Accepting the last idea as one probably correct, the girl went on lightly. The corpulent man had paused near the head of the stairs, and was looking around doubtfully, but at last, without seeing Blonde Bert, although she had almost reached him, he started forward, un-

ceremoniously opened the door of Mrs. Gray's room and entered.

He pushed the door back to close it, but the catch, being out of order, failed to hold, and it remained open an inch or more.

Bertina heard a frightened cry—the voice of Mrs. Gray.

"Enough of that!" cried the man, harshly. "No melo-drama now, for I won't allow it!"

"You, here!" gasped the widow.

"Right here."

"Heaven have mercy!"

"You have appointed your judge; let us see what decision will be handed in," was the sneer.

Bertina pushed the door further open. She could see both plainly, now. The man, who was very well dressed and of substantial appearance in all ways, looked ugly and dangerous; Mrs. Gray was almost as white as the handkerchief in her hand, and, plainly, in terror.

"Why have you come here?" she faltered.

"To see you—on business!"

"Heaven help me, I had hoped never to see you again."

"No doubt. Guilt always fears the accuser."

"Guilt! What have I done?"

"You've turned against the family you should have stood by through life and death. You, a country beggar, elevated to wealth, honor and social position by the foolish fancy of a foolish boy—you dare to turn against the power that raised you from the mire?"

"How have I done that? How did I ever prove false to the family honor? How did I ever tarnish the name of Elwell?"

"Enough that I knew your intentions."

"You did not know them!"

"Woman, you need not lie to me; it is useless. I know you; I know your desires. I know what you would have done ere now but for the firmness I have used."

"Firmness! Heaven save the name! Was it firmness to send me to a living death, to set mad-dened dogs upon me, to fire at me with murderous intent when you met me in the street?"

"Whatever I have done, you deserved it. Reared as you were in the bogs and woods of Connecticut you may not understand the demands of polite society, but I think you will by the time I get through with you."

"Heaven help me, your lessons, such as they are, have already been abundant!" Mrs. Gray exclaimed. "And now—now, why are you here?"

He regarded her with a pitiless face.

"Why, think you?"

"Is it to complete the work you began in the street? Is it to do murder?"

"So, you know your deserts!"

"I know your nature."

"You are impertinent, woman. How dare you address such language to me? My honor is without blemish, and always has been, and if I have used slightly rigorous measures with you, it is because you have forced me to do it to preserve the family honor."

"And who put the family honor in jeopardy? Who?"

"I know who the traitor in my own household was, and the trouble you have given me. It has been constant toil and study for me to keep you from mally ruining the good name my son bestowed upon you in marriage."

"Mowbrey Elwell, do not act the hypocrite!" Mrs. Gray cried, with more spirit. "I expect to face your pitiless enmity; I expect—just Heaven! I know not what I do not expect!—but I ask you not to act the hypocrite. You know I am guiltless. Admit this you must, for you cannot deny it. Why are you here?"

"You want to keep me to the point, eh?" returned Elwell, with a slow, meaning smile. "Well, since you are so anxious I will say that I have a revolver in my pocket—"

"And I am doomed? So be it—I will not ask for mercy. I have been hunted for years; I have known the horrors of a living death; the terror of being dragged down in a swamp by ravenous dogs; the sickening reality of not being able to go out on the street without meeting one who was ready to slay me—my life has been made torture, and I ask not to endure it longer. Do your work and have it over. Here, here is the chance; do your worst!"

The excited woman threw open her arms and stood where she presented her left side as a convenient target, but Mowbrey Elwell met the appeal with the usual slow smile.

"Don't let us rush this matter, Madeline. There is one chance left."

She heard the statement without apparent interest.

"And that?"

"People who once knew you in my circle believe you are sojourning in Europe; I have so told them. Make the belief a reality: go to Europe and swear never to return, and you shall be saved."

"I refuse."

"Why?"

"Because there, as here, I should be under watch. I should be in even greater danger than here, since an American abroad cannot hide as well as among her own people. Curiosity always hovers around a stranger in a strange land. There, your tools could mark my every movement, and, knowing this, I should never feel safe. At any moment I might meet your assassins. Perhaps it is to get such a chance you would send me there. I will not go!"

Her firmness caused the first ripple of uneasiness on Mowbrey Elwell's part.

"You are mad!" he exclaimed.

"I am desperate! You have hunted me until life has become a burden. I ask not to endure it longer. Do your work now—now! Do it, and leave the rest with Providence. Draw your revolver—I am content!"

Her utterance thrilled Bertina. The widow was in the same mood as when she sought the house-top. Her calmness was terrible, and Bertina could endure it no longer. She saw Elwell's hand fall to his hip-pocket, and the expression on his face convinced her that he would soon obey Mrs. Gray's order.

Bertina had been fascinated—charmed as by the malign influence of the rattlesnake—but her wits suddenly began to work rapidly, and, knowing her own weakness, she moved to get help elsewhere.

Turning, she ran quickly and rapidly down the stairs and opened the door of Gus Leonard's room. The place was dark, and when she spoke there was no answer. Was he absent, or asleep?

Determined to learn she took what seemed the quickest way and lighted the gas. Gus was not there. She was alone.

She stood troubled and dazed, uncertain what she had best do to save Mrs. Gray, when, all at once, she became aware that some one was ascending the stairs above—a man. Was help at hand? Was it Leonard?

She ran out into the hall, reaching that point just as the man gained the top of the stairs. Recognition at once followed.

It was Ezra Otis!

Anxious to seek the help even of such a man, Bert ran up the steps, but when she reached the floor above, Otis, encouraged perhaps by a brief cessation of conversation, and thus unwarned that Mrs. Gray had a caller already, had entered the room.

Bertina heard an exclamation of surprise in Elwell's voice, and then hastened to the door in time to see a striking tableau. Ezra Otis was the central figure, and it went without saying that he would rather have been a thousand miles away.

He stood staring at Elwell as if he had seen a ghost, and himself almost as white as such spectral forms are fancied to be.

Terror was expressed in every feature—wild, uncontrolled terror; and his breathing was audible. Elwell broke into a harsh, triumphant laugh.

"By my life!" he cried, "this meeting is most timely, and I'm glad to know the company our lady keeps. Birds of a feather flock together. Welcome, Sir Jail-bird!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CYCLONE FROM THE WEST.

EVEN the last few harsh words did not arouse Otis from his stupor. He could only gaze at Mowbrey Elwell, the look of terror never leaving his face. The bank president turned to Mrs. Gray.

"I see, madam, you have found a consoler in your exile!" he sneered. "Pray, what parson tied the knot?"

With stony calmness she returned:

"This is the second time I have seen him in years."

"Indeed? Well, that part matters not to me; your associations are not my concern. On the other hand, there is nobody else whose presence would give me so much pleasure as that of this man."

"I—I didn't know you were here," muttered Ezra.

"No? That's odd! I supposed you did know, and had rushed to my arms with zeal, to tell me how you escaped from Sing Sing."

Otis drew a deep breath, but said nothing.

"Where is your striped uniform?" Elwell

added, in the same sneering vein. "You ought to wear it still, for you will remember you did not wait to serve your time out. An escaped convict! Do you tell those you meet of the fact?"

"I tell them nothing."

"Possibly you are not proud that you did time for the State."

Sudden fire leaped into the man's face.

"I am proud of one thing—proud that I went there an innocent man!"

"Can you prove that statement?"

Otis turned and pointed to Mrs. Gray.

"There is the only person who can prove the fact!" he returned, in a deep voice.

"No, no!" she quickly answered; "I cannot prove it. Don't wrong me further; don't think me all selfish and evil. I cannot prove it."

Mowbrey Elwell was a shrewd man, and he guessed more of the truth from these few words, with the expression of face and inflection of voice that accompanied them, than a less astute person would. His first idea that they were in close bonds of friendship, if not of matrimony, he now saw to be false. Even Ezra's rags proclaimed it when contrasted with Mrs. Gray's neat, attractive dress.

"Never mind all this," the banker resumed, with fresh confidence. "I want to talk with you, sir. You are an escaped convict. You decapitated your term at Sing Sing by a good many years, and, as jail-birds are not desirable members of society, you'll have to go back."

"I'll die, rather!"

"Oh! will you? Your mind and Madeline's run in the same channel, it seems. Well, if you both feel that way, I would suggest that rat-poison is cheap. See? But you are not so plastic as you seem, sir, and Time has not yet molded you into a dying vessel. You hang to life as to your old ways. Well, when I go out I'll send a policeman in to see you."

Ezra folded his arms, and spoke with the calmness of despair:

"He will not take me alive!"

Elwell turned to Mrs. Gray:

"Madam, go for an officer!"

"I, sir?"

"You! Go, but see to it you don't try to run away. I have a man on watch outside," this was a would-be shrewd falsehood—"who will at once nab you if you try it. Neither of you can escape me. Go!"

"I will not!"

"Do you defy me?"

"Sir," Mrs. Gray returned, feverishly, "for long years that man has suffered through my silence; now, he shall not endure one hardship through act of mine. May Heaven give its protection to him, and enable him to escape the toils you would spread for his feet. Do with me as you will, kill me if you wish, but this bear me swear: I will not go as you order!"

Fury appeared in Mowbrey Elwell's face, and he grasped her arm with savage roughness.

"Dolt! Idiot!" he cried, "you will obey me or I'll throw you headlong down the stairs!"

He began dragging her toward the door, but had taken only two steps when there was a sudden, sharp sound—a crash—and Bank President Elwell lay sprawling on the floor. He had been knocked down by a blow as neat as any professional could have delivered, and the strength which went with it was amazing. Elwell had an unpleasant notion that his left eye had been jammed clean through his head.

Despite this, being a hardy man, he floundered over on his knees and rose with agility rarely seen in one of his size. He supposed, of course, that he owed the blow to Ezra Otis, but, on gaining his feet, saw that an entirely new actor was on the scene: an athletic young man.

He glared at him madly.

"Did you do that?"

"Yes," the young man replied, coolly.

"How dared you? How?"

"How dared I? Why it don't take any great courage to knock over a fat sneak like you!"

"What?" roared Elwell.

"Hogs are killed every day that are better men than you."

"Dare to speak like that again and—"

"What will you do, bully? Are you a fighter, Sir Ruffian? Do you object to be called villain, coward, dog, sneak or loathsome reptile? You are all of these! You are anything but a man! You are a creature too mean, too utterly contemptible to contaminate this earth with your vile presence. If you find aught in my remarks which seems lacking in respect, what are you going to do about it?"

For once Elwell was speechless. His boundless pride of worldly position had been shocked by the first uncomplimentary name applied to him, and he purposed making a big bluster about it, but when other like terms came floating in in such a perfect deluge he was utterly dumfounded. And to cap the climax this insolent fellow was as cool as ice; was wholly free from swagger or "toughness," and looked capable of standing by all he said.

Finally the aristocrat found speech.

"Who—who are you?" he asked, chokingly.

"My name is Gus Leonard, and, lest you should forget it, here is my card."

And the aggressive ex-cowboy flung a bit of pasteboard at Elwell so deftly that it struck full in the latter's face.

This additional insult did not improve Mowbrey's temper.

"You ruffian!" he exclaimed, "if I were a younger man I would not submit to this."

"If you were a younger man you would not be in one piece, now. Ruffian is a word which fits well on your lips, for a man of less ignoble mold would not be guilty of seizing a lady as you did, and threatening to throw her down the stairs. Were there one iota of shame left in your degraded mind you would blush at recollection of your own infamy, sir, and if I descended to the level of using coarse terms, it was only because they seemed to fit to the letter. Furthermore, if you have any grievance, you are at liberty to seek satisfaction any way you choose. As an actor of the role of bully toward women you are a success. Now, let us see how you deal with men?"

Gus was almost overmastered by his indignation.

Mrs. Gray's wrongs made his honest blood boil.

Elwell gave him no chance to act on the defensive. Already the banker's injured eye was swelling rapidly, and it bade fair to be closed for repairs ere long.

He did not care to invite further trouble of that kind.

"I do not care to pit my age against yours," he finally said, his voice low and husky and his face pale; "nor am I a disciple of the prize-ring."

"Your forte is bullying women, sir!" Gus retorted.

"As you are two to my one I will not stay to quarrel; I have no wish to be butchered by barbarians."

"I know your refined way; it is to throw women down the stairs!"

Elwell was furious. He could not say anything without receiving one of the cutting retorts for which Gus seemed to be famous, and they cut more than even Leonard imagined. It was not that the banker was wedded to a notion of honor, true or counterfeit, but it galled him amazingly that he was thus addressed.

"I will go," he muttered, chokingly.

"And I will walk with you a couple blocks. If you see fit to have me arrested for striking you, all well and good; but this you can rely upon: You are not going to send in a gang of toughs whom you may have near, for all I know. I'll walk with you!"

"I object."

"Your objection is overruled."

"But I will not walk—"

"You will walk with me. Go on!"

Paler yet became the face of the discomfited knave, but as he marked the inexorable ring in Leonard's voice he knew how useless remonstrance would be, and pride prevented him from making any.

Side by side they went out.

CHAPTER XIII.

GONE!

WHEN the two men were fairly gone Bertina looked around to see what was left after the storm. When Gus arrived on the scene he had taken everything into his own hands and absorbed all the attention, and Bert had been one of the most attentive listeners.

She now saw Mrs. Gray sitting in a chair, looking pale and ill, but visual search for Ezra Otis was not so successful. He had taken advantage of the encounter between Leonard and Elwell, and slipped out quietly without being seen by any one.

Bertina knelt by her friend's side.

"Oh! Mrs. Gray," she exclaimed, "you don't know how sorry I be fer you?"

"I can easily believe it, child."

"Don't you worry any more, fer Gus will look out fer you."

"Mr. Leonard is kind and brave."

"Meo, oh! meo, but didn't he just light on

that man! Why, it sounded like a pistol-shot, an' he went over like I've seen ten-pins in a bowling-alley; an' he rattled 'most as much, too. If I could hit like that I'd just like to see that wretch come in here!"

Bertina's eyes flashed, and she doubled up her small hands to illustrate how she would do it.

Mrs. Gray did not answer. She believed Gus fully able to care for himself, so she turned her thoughts from him to other matters. She wondered what would be the result of all this to others. Ezra Otis had fled, and, warned, as he was, might be able to keep out of sight, but what of herself? Elwell had discovered her refuge, and there would be no further safety for her there.

It was upon her lips to make a certain statement to Bertina, but she changed her mind and said nothing. They sat together, hand in hand, waiting and watching.

For what?

Every moment they expected to hear footsteps on the stairs. Whose coming would they herald? Leonard was expected back, and so did both expect, though the matter was not mentioned, that others would appear. Bertina looked to see Elwell come with officers of law with him, but Mrs. Gray, well aware that the man had no desire to divulge the case to the public, expected bravos, rather.

She sat in silence, waiting for him—waiting as the condemned criminal might in his cell for the coming of the executioner, yet without even the small consolation of being condemned by lawful powers.

Her nerves were all aquiver, and the least sound in the lower part of the house made her change color.

When would the blow fall?

As time passed and it was deferred, the idea which had before been in her mind returned, and was this time entertained with more gravity. She was about to mention it when Bertina, who had been thinking also, hesitatingly remarked:

"If Mr. Leonard would come back, so you wouldn't be alone, I'd like ter go out."

"Why shouldn't you go, anyway?"

"I'm afraid that horrid man will come."

"I can go to Mr. Leonard's room, and no one will think of looking for me there. In fact, Bertina, I would like to be alone for a little while, to lie down and rest and get over my nervousness."

Blonde Bert thought this a very good idea, and they proceeded to act upon it. She put on her hat and accompanied Mrs. Gray to Leonard's quarters, and then went out. She saw none of the male actors in the late scenes.

She hurried along without any pause until she reached Greenwich avenue, and then, entering the house where Stumps lived, burst into his room in a state of some excitement.

She had been far-seeing enough to understand that there could be no more safety for the widow at her present home, and she not only wished to ask The Three Spotters to take charge of the matter and protect Mrs. Gray, but felt that the sooner they knew of recent events, the better it would be.

Mrs. Gray, Ezra Otis and Mowbrey Elwell were so plainly shown to be all concerned in one case, whatever it was, that the information was highly valuable.

Considerably to Bert's surprise, she found Gus Leonard already there. He had been ahead of her with his story.

This fact did not make her less welcome, however; she was warmly received, and at once plied with questions, for she had heard far more than Leonard. The latter had arrived on the scene only a few moments before he made his appearance and served Elwell in such a summary fashion.

"What have you learned of the case, Bertina?" asked Jim Royal.

"I do believe I am't learned a thing. I've been goin' over it, and though they did a heap of talkin', I can't see as I'm much wiser than I was."

"But have you no clew to the mystery of Mrs. Gray's life?"

"Nothin', only Elwell is mad at her."

"And Ezra Otis?"

"He's an escaped convict."

"I'm not surprised."

"I don't think he's bad!"

"Some convicts are not; some are victims to circumstances, or to the schemes of enemies. It would not surprise me if Otis owes all his difficulties to Elwell. By the way, you must have heard Elwell's real name—for, of course, he's not named Ezra Otis?"

"No; I didn't hear it. For all they talked so much they never spoke it."

"Then we are not likely to get that thread, at present. But go over the interview and let us know just what you did hear."

Bertina obeyed, and told the story eloquently. All her sympathy was with Mrs. Gray; she hated the banker vehemently, and there were no excuses for him in her account. Plainly and truthfully told the story revealed the man in all his glaring villainy, and Gus was complimented all around for the blow he had struck.

"It is my opinion," decided Jim Royal, presently, "that you and I, Mr. Leonard, should call on Mrs. Gray and endeavor to have an understanding. Situated as she is, she cannot in reason decline to confide in, and receive the help of her friends. Working in the dark, we are poorly equipped for defense, but with all the facts known to us, we can act intelligently."

"That's true."

"Then let us go to her, at once."

Gus agreed promptly, and they and Bertina went at once. Reaching the house they ascended to the upper floors. On the way they looked into Leonard's room, but it was vacant.

Then they went to Mrs. Gray's quarters.

"Why! she ain't here!"

The exclamation came from Bertina as she gained view of the room. The place was just as the girl had left it, but Mrs. Gray was not there.

"Can she have gone to one of the other ten-ants?" Gus asked, anxiously.

"She never visited anybody," Blonde Bert reminded, trouble in every tone.

Jim Royal had been using his eyes to good purpose, and he now quickly crossed the floor and lifted a sheet of paper which had been lying there. A few lines were upon it, written in a hurried way, it seemed, and he read all. Then he turned a troubled face toward his companions.

"Is it from her?" Bertina demanded, eagerly.

"You shall hear. Listen!"

And he read as follows:

"TO MY FRIENDS:—

"For reasons sufficient to me I have decided to go away for a few days. Keep my room as it is, and I will return to occupy it, shortly."

"MADELINE GRAY."

Blonde Bert's eyes sparkled with sudden fire.

"She never wrote that!" the girl cried.

"I believe you," Royal agreed, promptly.

"Even if we had no reason to suspect trouble might come to her, I should not believe it. Would she write a letter like that, never mentioning me nor Mr. Leonard, an' goin' off all of a sudden without givin' a reason? No, sir; she wouldn't! She never wrote it; never, never!"

The speaker was excited, but she only voiced the belief of the others. They did not know anything about her style of penmanship, and the writing was delicate enough to be a lady's, but the note, itself, was not natural.

Madeline Gray was not one to pen such a cool, off-hand note.

"If she did not write it, some enemy did,"

Royal proceeded.

"My God! she has fallen into Mowbrey Elwell's hands!" Leonard exclaimed.

"Yes, yes; that fiend has got her!" Bertina agreed, sobbing. "Oh! why did I go away? She is lost forever."

"No!" cried the Spotter, in a ringing voice. "She is gone, but, at last, we know her enemy."

"We know him, and we will hunt him down and rescue her. The world is not wide enough to screen him from our vengeance!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CHUNKY JAKE REAPPEARS.

CONSIDERING that the case was one never as yet officially recognized by law, Jim Royal was considerably excited, but his sympathies were aroused to the keenest degree.

Gus Leonard caught his hand and wrung it warmly, almost fiercely.

"Go ahead, Royal, and you shall yet be well paid. Do your best to hunt those devils down."

Jim put the note carefully in his pocket. He had a vague hope that it might yet be made useful. He saw no paper in the room like that upon which it was written, while its appearance—a closely-folded half-sheet—satisfied him that some one had been carrying it in his pocket for some time.

He looked for further signs, but found none. Evidently Mrs. Gray had left Leonard's room after Bertina went away, but just where she had been seized was not certain. There was no sign of a struggle, and none of the other tenants had heard the sound of struggling. Inquiry outside was equally fruitless; no trail had been left.

The trio met to talk again when this investigation was over. It was a noticeable fact that no one referred to Mrs. Gray's past attempt at suicide, or hinted that she might deliberately have gone to renew the attempt.

Loyal, indeed, were the friends she had left.

Bertina urged that no time should be allowed to go to waste, and Leonard echoed her words. Jim, too, knew the value of prompt action, and was quite willing to use the remaining time before midnight in energetic work. As some one ought to remain at the Thirteenth street house it was decided that this should be Blonde Bert's position for the night.

Preliminaries arranged, Royal went quickly to Greenwich avenue and notified the other members of the Spotter Trio.

Bobby Blossom slid into his jacket and cap like an eel.

"Crickety-jim!" he exclaimed, "this is like old times. Makes a feller's blood git a tingle on. Hey, Stumpsey? I guess we'll hev some fun, now."

"Robert, you shouldn't indulge in levity when that poor woman is in trouble."

"Nary lev, Stumpsey; it's only the hope she won't monopolize all the fun that stirs me up. Maybe we kin get inter trouble ef we try fer it hard," the irrepressible youth returned, with an air of candor.

"My theory," Royal explained, "is that Elwell went out, secured a cab and took Mrs. Gray away thus. He could hardly have taken her on foot for two reasons: she would have appealed to a policeman, and, moreover, the chances are she would have been noticed. I can find no one who did see her. Thus, while I do not bind you to any plan of action, I want you to pay particular attention to any cab you see. If there is a chance, question the driver thereof."

"We'll turn every cab upsid down an' shake out passengers an' secrets," Bobby declared.

There was no such thing as heading off his volatility and good humor, and his graver friends let him talk.

They went out together, and, in order to cover as much ground as possible, each then went away alone. It was agreed that if no discoveries were made they should meet at their headquarters at midnight, and that hour saw them all together again.

Nothing had been learned.

Retiring early, in order to get all the rest possible, they put in the night to the best advantage, but were on the trail early the next morning. At this point their movements became more systematic. It was agreed that Royal should watch Mowbrey Elwell as closely as possible, while Stumps and Bobby, going together, should have a roving commission.

In the latter way, too, went Leonard and Blonde Bert, who could not endure inactivity, and stood some chance of making discoveries.

That noon Bobby and Stumps sat down in a cheap restaurant to eat their dinner.

"No diskivories!" sighed the wooden-legged man.

"Never mind, Stumpsey, we'll git there, yet."

"But what may not happen ter that poor woman in the meanwhile?"

"Yowlin' cats! but ain't old Mob Elwell a bad 'un? I don't know w'at's eatin' him, but a feller who would bound a nice woman like Mrs. Gray must be a mean riptyle. Hey, Stumpsey?"

"Right, Bobby."

"Jee-Susanna! but I'm in a fever ter get ter work ag'in. Had enough ter eat? Swaller that coffee, an' let's get a wiggle on an' look fer the Thugs we are trailin'."

"Wait!" Stumps directed, with a sudden change of expression.

"W'ot's up?"

"Robert, did you git a good enough look at Chunky Jake, that day last winter, in court, so you'd recognize him ag'in?"

"Cert! Do you mean—"

"Sly yer eye around an' notice the feller outside, with his hands jammed down in his pockets and coat-collar turned up, like as though he was jest off on a burglar job—"

"That's him; that's Chunky Jake!"

"Sure?"

"Yowlin' cats! yes; of course. Couldn't mistake Jacob's Bowery mug fer no other face, 'cause it jest don't hev no rival fer ugliness. Say, w'ot's he sneakin' around here fer? Is he spot-tin' us?"

Stumps meditated, and then answered slowly: "I don't think it. He seems ter be waitin' fer some one. Very likely it's a matter that don't concern us, ef Jeems has discovered he's mixed up in the case. But we don't want ter

be hasty. Wait a bit, an' see what will foller. There may be fun ahead."

"Hi!"

Bobby nudged his friend so sharply in the ribs that the latter started and knocked over what was left of the coffee, but the circumstance passed unheeded. They were more interested in matters outside. A cab had stopped by the curbstone and the driver alighted—a fact which was not peculiar. But he came up to Chunky Jake at once and was greeted as if he had been expected—a fact that made an impression.

"Yowlin' cats! hev we struck it?"

"Be still, and watch."

Jake and the cabman fell into earnest conversation, but it was soon over. From his pocket Jake took an envelope and handed to his companion. The latter opened it, took out a crisp bank-note and nodded approvingly.

After a few more words Jake walked away, while the cabman suspended a pail of oats from his horse's neck and gave the animal a chance to eat. This done he entered the restaurant and, as luck would have it, sat down at the same table with the Spotters.

Bobby slyly pinched his ally, and Stumps cleared his throat and observed:

"Sir, I seen you outside with a party I know."

The cabman started and looked uneasy, but after a glance at the humble-looking couple his face cleared.

"O! did you?"

"Yes. Have you known Jacob long?"

"Never saw him until last night," the cabman answered, with the air of a man not anxious to claim acquaintance.

"Where did you see him?"

Again a suspicious glance was bent on them.

"If he is your friend, go to him for points," finally returned the driver.

"He ain't my friend. Do you know why?"

"No."

"He is a law-breaker, an ex-convict, the associate of knaves, an' a man ready fer any piece o' rascality."

"Well, well, that's nothing to me; I only carried some friends of his as fares. I never saw them before, and never expect to again."

"Was it a woman an' a fat man?"

"See here—why are you so inquisitive?"

"Because a wrong has been done, an' I b'lieve you are a man honest enough ter help along the cause o' justice, ef convinced that you ought ter do it."

"I am an honest man, and don't knowingly help or shield rogues. Of course I carry all kinds in my cab, for I can't ask for a certificate of good character from my fares. But I never shield evil-doers. Now, what are you driving at?"

"One word, friend! Describe the lady an' the fat man you carried last night."

The cabman obeyed, and when he had given the descriptions, and told the time and place of his engagement, the Spotters no longer had a doubt.

They were on the track.

CHAPTER XV.

STUMPS TAKES A BIG RISK.

"I WAS down on Thirteenth street," explained the cabman, "when that same fellow you saw outside, Jake—the rest of his name I didn't hear—came up and engaged me. Directed by him I drove to an old house which I thought was deserted, at first, but out from under the stoop came a man, a fat fellow, leading a woman."

"Jake had said she was sick, and I thought nothing of it when she seemed to be in a passive mood. She walked, but only with the help of the big man."

"I took the two away, Jake leaving us, and, according to orders carried them to the Mebaloe Flats, on — street. The big man took her in, and then came out and talked with me. I couldn't make out what he was driving at, but he questioned me about my family, and when he heard I was poor, and had a sick child, he said he always liked to do a bit of good for the needy."

"He said he had only three dollars, then. He gave me that, and said if I would come here at noon, to-day, I should have twenty dollars more."

"When Jake gave it to me I thought I'd struck luck, but if the big fellow was a crook, it may be a counterfeit."

He took out the crisp, new bank-note and looked at it curiously.

"It seems all right. I'll ask at the desk."

"Lemme take a squint at it," requested Bobby Blossom, whose sharp eyes had caught a word

which, if he had read it correctly wrong side to, was suggestive.

The cabman obeyed, and Bobby turned the bill toward Stumps with his finger resting on a certain point.

The note, which was genuine, was on the Marlstone Bank!

Entirely new as it was it satisfied them as to the identity of the big man in the case, and they had been in detective work too long to wonder at any mistake, or reckless move, a criminal might make. Police annals, they knew, bristled with stupid blunders on the part of evil-doers usually very shrewd. Elwell had let the bill go out when wisdom would have counseled the sending of money on any other bank than his own.

"What kind of a place is the Mebaloe Flats?" Stumps asked.

"The building was once a factory. Then it was divided by two partitions, and three houses made, all under one roof. The neighborhood is not of the best, and I presume the people of the flats are the same."

"Which one o' the three did your fares stop at?"

"I'm not sure, but my impression is, the middle one. But they may have stopped there only briefly, to frustrate pursuit, if there is anything crooked on foot."

This last idea impressed the Spotters strongly, and when they had left the cabman they were not certain how to proceed. Was it best to call an officer?

The Mebaloe Flats proved as unprepossessing as their informant had suggested—a long, homely edifice, the walls of which had sagged until it was warped out of true lines. The Spotters looked it over attentively, but saw no familiar face.

"W'ot's the programme?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know w'ot to say, Robert. The signs around there ain't encouragin', an' ef we should go forrard an' ask questions, we might only give the alarm an', ef Mrs. Gray is there, lead ter her bein' taken away. See?"

"Sure!"

"What's your idea?"

"Ef it wuz dark I'd go right in."

Stumps's gaze wandered down the street. Suddenly his face brightened and he plucked at Bobby's sleeve.

"Come!" he directed.

Ignoring questions, he led the way to the corner where stood a young Jew, with a tray suspended by a cord over which was his neck. In this tray was an assortment of combs, needles, pins, thimbles, scissors, and the like, and over his arm hung a quantity of suspenders.

For the latter Stumps had no use, but he proceeded to ask the Israelite what he would take for the rest of his stock, tray and all. The price was not modest, but it was accepted at once and the money paid. Then Stumps calmly hung the tray on his own neck.

As Bobby caught the idea his face brightened.

"Let me take it an' go in, Stumpsey."

"No; I'm goin'."

"But you may git inter trouble."

"So may you. Ef anybody is ter be done up, let it be me. Besides, I look the character, with my plain old clothes an' wooden leg. I'm the one fer the job, Robert."

This was not satisfactory to the junior Spotter, and he proceeded to say so, but, for once, Stumps was obstinate. He had no aspirations in the way of glory, but felt that his chances of escaping detection were better than Bobby's, and, anyhow, he was bound to assume the danger.

"My only fear is," he observed, as he left his ally, "that they won't allow a peddler in the house."

Bobby shook his head as he watched him go.

"My conscience smites me; it hadn't oughter be so. Ef they drop on Stumpsey he can't gallop down the stairs three at a lick, slide the bannisters, nor jump out o' the fourth story winder. As a race-boss he went stale when he parted with his left leg. This thing worries me!"

Stumps entered the middle house of the three, and at the end of five minutes the watcher decided that it was not a place where peddlers were barred out.

A neighboring clock enabled him to mark the lapse of time as he waited, and he saw the minutes wear on—fifteen, thirty, forty-five, sixty.

"An hour, an' no sign o' Stumpsey. Yowlin' cats! I hope he ain't got inter nodiff!"

The junior Spotter was getting nervous, and he was not relieved of his fears.

The Three Spotters' Duel in the Dark.

Another half-hour rolled by without developments. By that time he was thoroughly alarmed, and with a lugubrious face he gave vent to his fears.

"Et's come, sure-pop! Stumps has met the enemy, he's theirs. Et wouldn't take him all this time fer ter canvass that 'old rookery, an' there's only one ting fer me ter think. Mob Elwell has some beelers in there, an' they've gobbled my pard up ez Daniel did the lions in his den. Crickety-jim! this is an awful go! W'ot's ter be done?"

And Stumps—where was he?

When he entered the old house he was not driven out—far from it. There was no Argus-eyed janitor to pounce upon him, and he was among people who would as soon buy from a tray-peddler as at the best dry-goods store on Sixth avenue. More than that the women—women and children seemed to comprise the population—at once, and universally, showed a disposition to talk like race-horses to him, in a friendly way.

A woman would buy a comb or some trifling article, and then evince a disposition to fill up the rest of the day by joking with him.

His cordial reception had one good result: he was enabled to inquire concerning the occupants of the various flats before reaching them, but, though he heard an abundance of gossip, there was no mention of those he was seeking.

At last, after more delay than was to his liking, he reached the floor next to the top, and made a trifling sale to a woman named Mrs. Tobin.

"Be I likely ter sell to yer neighbors, mum?" he asked, with deferential politeness.

"Mrs. Trooper might buy a pair of specs, ef you hev the right kind."

"I think I can fit her eyes."

"Ef you do, I'll pay fer the spec."

"W'ot's the matter with her eyes—old age?"

"No; she's blind!"

Jolly Mrs. Tobin laughed heartily at her joke, and Stumps joined her, as in duty bound.

"I hardly think I shall sell much ter Mrs. Trooper. Who else lives on this floor?"

"Sure, there's only the new family that moved in last night."

"Last night, eh? Who was they?"

"I don't know, but I hear they are mighty nice. One on 'em is a young woman as pretty as a peach, an' she's married to a fat man who looks as ef he was a railroad president."

Now, Mrs. Tobin was drawing on her fancy, and preparing for another joke, but luck—evil luck—had so willed it that she interested the "peddler" at once.

"I'll try ter sell them, ef you'll show me the door, mum," he replied, with due gravity.

"D'ye see the door down beyant, there? Go an' open that, walk in, an' just beyond you'll see another door. Knock on that, an' I guess the pretty woman will see yer."

Stumps went, full of hope that he was to get light. He reached the first door; he opened it; he entered; and then—

He stood aghast.

He was face to face with Chunky Jake!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BLOW AND THE VICTIM.

STUMPS was startled. Striking as some of Mrs. Tobin's remarks had been, he had not really expected to get trace of the party he sought. One reason for this was that the people he had thus far seen, though humble and, in some cases, none too clean, seemed to be perfectly honest, and he was not inclined to believe much crookedness existed there.

Again, the new tenants had moved about freely, or so he judged from what Mrs. Tobin said. Thus, his visit was a precaution taken to make sure no one of the party was there.

When he encountered Chunky Jake he saw that he had made sure!

Startling as the meeting was, he did not forget that he relied upon an humble role to take him through all suspicions, and he half-raised the tray and meekly inquired:

"Want ter buy a comb, sir?"

It was a timely question, for Jake's hair and beard were on strike against neatness and order, but the burglar only glared at him and exclaimed:

"What in perdition are you doin' here?"

"I'm sellin' combs, razors, needles—"

"Satan take you! do yer think I don't know ye? You're one o' The Three Spotters!"

"I don't know w'ot you mean—"

"You lie! You're Jim Royal's pal, an' you're here ter pipe us, you sneakin' police spy!"

"Ef you're goin' ter use such violent language I'll retire—"

"Not much, you won't, cuss you! Try it, an' I'll bore ye t'rou' de eater. See?"

The ruffian jerked out a revolver, and Stumps saw the situation getting decidedly warm. He was no match for the athletic burglar, and he believed the latter fully capable of adding murder to his other crimes if he could gain anything thereby. It was evident that the gang had been run down, and what would Chunky Jake not do to insure his own safety?

The latter glared at Stumps, and then, seeing that he stood passive, turned his gaze on the door.

"How did you git in?"

"I jest turned the knob an' come in."

"You lie!"

Jake took a step and tried to open the door, but it resisted all of his efforts.

"Locked!" he exclaimed. "Now, I'd like ter know how you opened it."

"Wal, I s'pose it can be opened on one side an' not on the other, like a street door."

"Ef that's it, I'm glad ter know it, an' I'll see that nobody else does the trick."

He slipped the bolt.

"I'll go out—"

"No, you won't, you one-legged jay! You come in, an' that's all you've got ter do about it; I'll do the rest. So The Three Spotters are nosin' around here? Wal, I've got one on 'em, an' I'm goin' ter smash him!"

The bully shook his fist under Stumps's nose, and looked as if he intended to perform the job right away. But Stumps did not retreat a step. He stood with one hand on his now useless wares, and the other on his cane, and calmly responded:

"I don't see no need of it. You would waste your strength on somebody not worth it."

"You're a broken-down old bum, I know, but there is plenty of cussedness in your head, if not in your maulers. I'm goin' ter smash that cussedness out o' you!" and he swelled with the pride of brute strength and towered above Stumps, thinking what rare sport he would have in whipping a one-legged man who was considerably older than he.

"I don't want no trouble—"

"Oh! you don't, eh? Haw! haw! Wal, now, that's rich! Don't want a scrap with me, eh? Afraid you'll hurt me, or lose yer temper an' not be a good Sunday-school scholar, I s'pose? Eh? Don't want a scrap, do ye? Haw! haw!"

Chunky Jake flattered himself he was the funniest man in New York, and to impress himself still further with this belief he suddenly reached forward, seized Stumps's nose between his thumb and finger, twisted it smartly, and then leaped back a few feet.

The latter movement was not caused by any fear that Stumps would retaliate—of course that was absurd—but simply to keep up his own reputation as a humorist. He wanted to play with this helpless cripple in cat-and-mouse fashion; to amuse himself by acting the bully and making life a burden to his victim before proceeding to more serious business: to "wipe up the floor" with the intruder, and—

But Jacob had barely gained his new position and allowed his cavernous mouth to expand in an appropriate smile when there was a whistling sound, a crash, and the ruffian found himself lying on the floor.

He had felt a sensation as if his head had been cleanly split open by a lightning-bolt, but, as he had seen Stumps's cane come sweeping through the air, he knew the only lightning in the case had been that generated by the one-legged man's biceps.

Slowly Jake rose to a sitting position.

He saw Stumps try the door in an attempt to get out, but that was only a passing incident. Chunky Jake was dazed, and his head still rung with the blow of the cane.

There was another door, and, anxious to get out of the dangerous locality, Stumps opened it. He saw a kitchen-like room, and sight of him at once brought upon her feet a negress who was nearly as masculine and quite as ugly as Chunky Jake.

"Hi! who dar?" she cried, in manifest alarm.

"My good woman," Stumps explained, as calmly as possible, "I am a peddler, an' I got in here by mistake. I want ter go inter the hall—"

"No, yer don't!" she retorted. "You-un doan' go out till I knows who you are, Hi! Jake, where are you? What debbil's work is this?"

The white ruffian came staggering into the room.

"You dog! you villain!" he panted, addressing Stumps, "I'll fix yer now!"

Out came the revolver again, and he fully

intended to use it, but the negress sprung forward and wrested it out of his hand.

"What fer be you tryin' ter do?" she cried, angrily. "Want ter go shootin' in hyer an' alarm all ther neighbors, do ye? I guess not, boss! You-uns try it an' I'll belt you in de smeller. See?"

"Woman, he knocked me down! He smashed me with his cane, an' I'll do him up ef I live. Gimme that gun—"

"No, I won't; no shootin' won't be done hyer while I fill my uppers. Ef you want de police ter pull ye in, go out on the street an' kick up a row, an' get soaked; but I don't want that same. No shootin' here. You hear me?"

The masculine negress was evidently a person of authority, and, though Chunky Jake's wrath did not abate, he yielded to the inevitable. He began to rub his aching head.

"How'd you git knocked out?" the negress asked.

"Wal, it wuz like this, Cl'opatra. He come in, an' I—an' I—I thought I had him sure; an' I—an' I went ter the door ter see how he could git in w'en it was locked, an' ez I hadn't given him no provocation I didn't s'pose he would harm me, an' I sorter turned my back on him, an' as I wuz a-lookin' at the lock I couldn't see him, an' all of a sudden he swung his cane an' biffed me. See?"

It took Jacob some time to find an explanation which would cover up his open defeat, but though he floundered a good deal in seeking for it, he finally got on the track and rattled it off glibly.

Whatever Cleopatra thought, she expressed no disbelief.

"Wal, who's this man?" she asked.

"One o' The Three Spotters."

"Hi! dat so? Then they're on our track!"

"Mum," spoke Stumps, politely, "there is a mistake. I am only a peddler, an' I come in ter sell—"

"Gammon! I know what a police spy is, an' I know how ter deal with him."

Crossing the room she flung open another door.

"Go in there!" she ordered.

"Mum, I'll give ye twenty dollars ter let me go—"

She stamped her foot angrily.

"Go in!" she repeated. "You git yer carcass t'rou' dat door or I'll smash you. You hear me?"

She caught up the fire-poker, and the Spotter saw he must yield. He could not successfully oppose both these persons, for each was as hardy and strong as an ox, and if he gained Cleopatra's ill will she might be only too ready to yield to Chunky Jake's wishes and consent to his destruction.

Prudence demanded that he yield, and with a heavy heart he passed through the door indicated. Beyond, there was nothing but darkness—a place where he could see nothing—but he went. The door was banged to after him, and the key was turned in the lock.

He was a prisoner.

He looked around gloomily.

"Bobby was right," he commented; "a wooden-legged cripple was not the man fer this job. I'm done up, sure!"

CHAPTER XVII.

STRANGE SOUNDS BEHIND THE DOOR.

STUMPS was inclined to despair for a few moments, but courage returned to him.

"While there's life there's hope," he commented, "an' even ef an old hulk like me is cast on the rocks it don't matter so very much. But I'm not goin' on the rocks ef I kin help myself. Wonder what sort of a den I'm in?"

He had matches, and he proceeded to light one.

Being wary his first care was to see that there was no visible pit in the floor down which he might fall; then he swept his gaze around to take in the points of the room.

It was about twelve feet square; the floor was bare, and the walls were of undressed boards. But what impressed him most was the fact that no window was to be seen; the door by which he had entered was the only break in the walls.

He lighted a second match in the hope that he could discover a gas-fixure somewhere, but there was none. He was deprived of both natural and artificial light, and, plainly, must make the best of the dark, miserable room.

The situation was not pleasant, and it was rendered all the more unsatisfactory by the inquiry: Had he done any good by coming there? He had not seen Mrs. Gray. He had not proved she was there. Certainly, he had not rescued her.

And he was in prison—in danger.

His long tramp had made him weary, and he sat down on the floor, for want of a better seat. As he did so a clock in the next room struck the hour of four, showing how time had fled while he was making his patient canvass as a peddler.

His chief anxiety was for Bobby Blossom. Loyal to the core and brave as a lion, the boy might run the risk of entering, alone, and it seemed as if that would only add to his troubles; the boy could not defeat the enemy on even terms.

Another hour passed.

Then, in the kitchen, loud, angry voices rumbled, and it became evident that Chunky Jake and Cleopatra had quarreled. If Stumps had any doubt as to the cause, he was soon enlightened.

A hand was laid on the door-knob, and then came a scuffle outside.

"I tell you," cried the negress, "you sha'n't go in!"

"An' I tell you," shouted the burglar, "I'll kill that wooden-legged devil afore I'm an hour older!"

The struggle was renewed, and it seemed that she had pushed Jake back, but it was not a lull. The angry voices continued to be audible, and Stumps heard Jake reiterate his last assertion.

The Spotter took the largest pair of shears out of his tray and, rising, stood ready for action, the impromptu weapon firmly grasped. Jake was likely to rely upon his revolver, but if he ventured on more manly measures, Stumps was determined not to yield tamely.

Finally the voices ceased to be heard, and he judged that Cleopatra had convinced Jake, or that the latter, finding he could not bully his way to success, had adopted another course and, pretending to be convinced, was waiting for a chance to strike.

At last the prisoner ventured to sit down again, and, for a long time, the only thing to break the weary waiting was the striking of the clock, hour by hour.

When it struck ten, he drew a deep breath.

"I guess I'm doomed ter stay here over night," he murmured.

Rat-tat-tat!

It was a knock at the door, and he rose with all the agility he could muster. Why did the unknown rap when the door was locked on the other side?

Hark! Again the knock!

Stumps was puzzled, but it occurred to him that the sounds must be made by some one besides his known captors. They had closed their captive in and turned the key, and, naturally, would not expect, or desire, an answer. He went close to the door. Once more came the knock. Who was it? An ally of Chunky Jake's, or his own friend?

"Odd!" he thought; "it seems to be at the bottom o' the door. Kin it be a child?"

Again came the puzzling sound, and he determined to make an effort to gain information.

"Who is there?" he asked, cautiously.

The old knock was the only answer. This time it was so plain it was at the bottom of the door that he knelt down to repeat the question:

"Who is there?"

A queer sound, not a rap, answered him; it was as if some one was choking to death, choking within his reach, yet the same as miles away. He experienced a queer sensation, and was not sure but his hair was rising on end. Troubled and nervous as he was, and shut up in total darkness, this exterior demonstration was decidedly ghostly.

"Is any one there?" he continued.

Again the choking sound! He was alarmed more than ever. What did it mean? Was some one dying there?

He put his head closer to the floor, and, believing he distinguished a faint ray of light, put out his hand investigatively. His fingers touched some small, loose object which rattled on the floor. What was it? What—

"A key!"

He could hardly avoid shouting the words, for hope flashed up once more. Quickly he rose; eagerly he fitted the bit of brass to the keyhole. He turned; he heard the bolt spring back.

It was a vast change, and his hand was not wholly steady as he opened the door. What lay beyond? Darkness!—that was all he could see. The room was not lighted. He paused. Perhaps a trap was there.

Once more he gave an excited start. Almost before his feet sounded that strange gurgling which was so like that of a dying person, and before he could move away something touched his ankle with a peculiar motion.

"In mercy's name, who is it?" he asked.

Only the gurgle answered him.

By this time he was all out of patience, and determined to solve the mystery, even at the cost of further mishap. He struck a match, and, seeing the gas fixture close at hand, gained a brilliant light at one stroke.

He was well repaid.

On the floor lay Bobby Blossom, bound and gagged—the mystery of the "gurgle" was solved, and the boy's appearance indicated some disgust that he had been so long in making himself understood. As quickly as possible Stumps freed him from bonds.

"Thank Heaven you are alive!"

"I be, Stumps; I ain't no condemned old ghost, an' don't you think I be. But we've got ter hustle out o' here, or Jake an' the brunette beauty will be around an' gobble us. See? Waltz!"

Bobby was in good condition, if he had been subjected to hard usage, and was just as lively as ever. He opened a door near at hand, but it proved to lead to a closet, and when he tried another which, he now realized, was the one they wanted, it did not yield.

"Locked in, by crickety-jim!"

"Where are Jake an' the negress?" Stumps asked.

"Gone out fer a bit, but expected back every minute. Want to see them?"

"Don' be absurd, Bobby! You have no reason ter look on it as a joke, judgin' by the way you was gurglin', an' your tied-up condition."

"Say, they about did us, didn't they, Stumps? When you didn't come out I walked in ter see w'at the fix was. I traced ye to this floor, an' actually come in here, not knowin' how they run the ranch. I nigh about got ketched between Jake an' the old woman, an' jest had time ter dodge under that table. There I lay fer two hours, an' then they happened ter see me, an' I was soon tied up ez you found me."

"But where be they, now?"

"I only know they went out. I'd found out where you was, an' got my eye on the key, which was on the table, an' I had an awful time gettin' it, an' workin' it over ter the door. Course I couldn't use it, fer I could not stand up, so I pushed it under the door an' rapped fer you. I didn't know you was in the dark, but I couldn't hev talked ef it had been twice as dark."

"Bobby, how are we ter get out?"

"We've got ter smash that door!"

"Can we do it?"

"We kin try."

The junior Spotter looked around for some implement heavy enough to effect the work, but, at that moment, a key was introduced to the lock on the other side.

The door opened and the negress appeared.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MORE LIGHT ON THE DARK DUEL.

DETECTIVE ROYAL found this note on his table:

"If you want a small pointer on Mrs. Gray's case come to her old residence and inquire for Matthew Drake. He thinks he can give you a hint."

Spotter Jim had come in wearied by a hard day's work, and the continued absence of Stumps and Bobby Blossom gave him no one to exchange views with, but the note revived his spirits somewhat.

Who Matthew Drake was he did not know, but he went at once to the Thirteenth street house, and there ascertained that he was a "lone man," who lived on the first floor. Moreover, Matthew was ill and in poor circumstances, financially.

Jim went in to see him, and, in a small and dreary room found an intelligent-looking, haggard young man, who was propped up in bed. He recognized the visitor at once and exclaimed:

"I'm glad you have come!"

"So am I, if you can give me light."

"Go to the Mebaloe Flats, and try your luck there."

"Where is that?"

Drake gave the street and number.

"Why do you advise me to go there?"

"Because I know Mowbrey Elwell owns the flats, and I think it just the place he would select as a prison for Mrs. Gray."

"Allow me to ask what you know about this matter, Mr. Drake."

"I know Elwell is Mrs. Gray's enemy; how I know it I will tell you presently. Although a sick man I have not been confined to my bed, and have observed many things which have been transpiring here. I know Mrs. Gray was in hiding here. You, I know by sight, and I know

not only that The Three Spotters have taken up her cause professionally, but that they are her personal friends. That's why I sent for you."

"And you think she is in Elwell's hands. Why?"

"Because he is her enemy. Now, I saw her go out just before you missed her, and I believe Elwell seized her on the street."

"Why should she go out?"

"I don't know."

"Can you give me no light except that you suspect Elwell seized her, and that she is in the Mebaloe Flats?"

"None whatever, but as to the source of her trouble, who can doubt? I was at the insane asylum when Mowbrey Elwell put her there."

"What! did he do that? When was it?"

"About three years ago. I was an attendant there, then, and I plainly remember when she was committed. False names were given; the entry was to the effect that Eliza Rogers was committed to the asylum by her father, John Rogers."

"How could the lie be worked?"

"Easily enough. It was a private asylum in Jersey, and of the worst class; the doctors would, and did, sell their souls for money. I recognized Elwell when he came, or I never should have known the truth, perhaps."

"Mrs. Gray—her real name is Madeline Elwell, and she is Mowbrey's daughter-in-law—was under female attendants, but I saw enough of her to know she was perfectly sane."

"I often talked with the female attendants, and though we all had to harden our hearts in that place of horrors, or leave it, we grew to feel more for Mrs. Gray than any one else. She was a lady, and was always patient and kind to the attendants."

"Of course, like others, she tried to bribe the women, but the doctors had a strong force of ruffians who ruled all and made scheming useless on the part of those who had hearts left."

"I was one of the latter, and though I was getting far better pay than I could command elsewhere, I finally determined to leave. Just before I was ready to give my notice Mrs. Gray escaped!"

"I know now that she actually bribed one of the minor doctors of the place. He turned against his superiors and got her away."

"What followed is even more horrible."

"One of the keepers got word to Elwell, and the latter sent a ruffian named Jacob Krauss, more commonly known as Chunky Jake, to hunt her down. Jake and the keeper took two fierce dogs and started."

"The fugitive had been taken ill, and had secreted herself awhile in a deserted building, a delay which gave them a chance which was improved. They got trace of her and put the dogs on the trail."

"You will not wonder that she saw fit to live as a recluse in after days when you hear of this. She was pursued through a great swamp by the brutes that, certainly, would have killed her if given a chance, for they were like hungry wolves."

"Outstripping Jake and the keeper the dogs followed her for miles—a mad race—a race of death—and overtook her at last."

"But they were foiled."

"Jake and his fellow ruffian were near enough to hear two rifle-shots, but, though they suspected the truth, they went on to the spot, finally. They found the dogs dead, with evidence that they had first run the unfortunate woman down and mired her in the treacherous land."

"They realized that some chance hunter had been at hand; had shot the dogs and saved the woman. They did not learn who did it. Mrs. Gray escaped and, I judged, had two years of peace of a certain kind."

"I left the asylum, but have since been in hard luck. I knew, during the past two months, I was in the same house with her, but I said nothing. When I took sick, food, medicine and nourishing articles were sent me by her, though I think she did not even know me by sight."

"Mr. Royal, she is a noble woman, and I wish I could go, now, and help her. I implore you to do all in your power."

Spotted Jim reached over and shook the sick man's hand.

"You have shown up well under circumstances not wholly in your favor, Mr. Drake," he replied, "and I am much obliged for all you have told me. I'll go immediately to the place named, and when I get this matter settled I'll look in on you again. You impress me as an honest man."

Jim went out, took a cab and drove at once to the Mebaloe Flats. He was determined to make short work there, so he secured an as-

sistant on the way, but events proved that extra help was not needed.

As he left the cab he heard a voice exclaim: "Yowlin' cats!"

Quickly he looked up; Bobby Blossom and Stumps stood in the doorway, evidently having just come out, and their dusty, begrimed appearance told of events out of the common channel.

"Have you been in here?" Royal asked, quickly.

"Wal, a few!" Robert returned, dryly.

"And Mrs. Gray?"

"Took away, I'm afeerd. We've jest had a set-to with a charmin' damsel named Cleopatra. You see, we was jest goin' ter escape when she opened the door an' got in our way. I sailed inter her at once, an' Stumps, he slapped his wooden leg in between her trotters an' give her a tumble. Then we had it all our own way, of course. The old woman wouldn't admit she knew where Mrs. Gray was, so we locked her in an' left her there. See?"

"I don't see at all. Make it clearer!"

"They got Stumps first; then they got me by a fluke. They left me tied up an' went away. Then Stumpsey an' I joined forces an' got clear, an' we had only ter unhorse Cleopatra an' the work was done. On?"

"And Mrs. Gray?"

"Taken away ag'in."

"Has she really been here?"

"We reckon so, though the old black-mug won't own up. She accused us o' bein' white trash an' pale monkeys, which hurted our feelin's."

"Lead me to that woman!"

They went, and Royal took his turn at persuading Cleopatra. He was not in mood to dally with her, and when he again refused information he did not hesitate to resort to energetic measures. He put a revolver to her temple and, as ferociously as possible, made threats which speedily brought her to her senses.

She confessed that Mrs. Gray had been there.

"Where is she now?"

"Chunky Jake an' de other man done took her away, an' I have a notion they took her ter Jake's boss. I doan' know, fer they-uns didn't tell me."

Royal finally led his warriors out.

"It seems to be touch and go all the time, but mostly 'go.' Here's for another push, and may our luck be better!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A GAME OF BULLETS.

ALL attempts to trace the abductors away from the house proved unavailing. If any one in, or outside, had seen Mrs. Gray taken away the fact could not be learned. All professed not to have seen her.

Mrs. Tobin, the woman who had been the means of sending Stumps into the midst of his enemies, as before described, expressed sincere regret.

She had not had any suspicion that the tenants were law-breakers. She had seen Cleopatra, and had been told that all of the family were colored, and, consequently, had imagined it a fine joke to talk of a "beautiful lady" and get Stumps to go in there.

She now asked to be forgiven, and Stumps acted the philosopher and made no reproaches.

Once outside the trio gathered for consultation.

"What will 'be the next move?" Royal asked.

"You've asked too much," confessed the wooden-legged man.

"He's took Madeline ter his home base," promptly amended Bobby.

"I have been considering that possibility, and the advisability of getting out a search-warrant."

"But," urged Stumps, "would he be so rash as ter take her right to his own house?"

"In the rashness lies the possibility. It is sometimes best to do, not what is wisest on the surface, but what is not expected by the opposition. Elwell knows by this time that he is 'in it' for a war-dance, and he is bold enough to venture on any step which he might think promised success."

"That's a fact."

"I have a plan for the case. I wish you and Bobby to go to the block where Elwell lives, look the place over, see if you can discover suspicious signs; try to learn if any woman has come there in a cab—make yourselves known to the patrolman on that beat, and inquire of him. Then, whatever the result may be, you may return to our quarters. As for Bobby—do you want to remain on watch?"

"Bet yer collar-button!" Bobby declared.

"So be it, then. If you learn anything, telephone, or come in person."

"Correct, general; an' you kin depend on Robert Bonaparte Napoleon Blossom fer ter razzle-dazzle the enemy. Yowlin' cats! but I'm pinin' fer a bit of excitement."

"You've raised an appetite quickly, after your latest brush. Well, let it stand that way."

The trio separated, and Jim returned to their headquarters. On the table he found a sealed letter which, evidently, had come by special messenger. He opened it and read as follows:

"JAMES ROYAL:—I have information which I think valuable, and would like to see you as soon as possible. I don't want to leave here, and can lose no time waiting at the office, so come to me at 9th avenue and 15th street.

GUS LEONARD."

Royal looked at the note thoughtfully, even after the last word was read. It seemed to be a very innocent affair, but he was not wholly satisfied. He called the servant and learned that a boy had brought it, but the identity and whereabouts of the boy were alike unknown.

Not for a moment did the detective think of failing to answer the call in person, but he was by no means sure it had come from Gus Leonard.

In his professional life he had grown accustomed to snares and decoys set for him by the criminal classes, and he was suspicious that one of the kind was dimly visible in the present case.

He went close to the light and examined his revolver with care, and then put it in his pocket and left the house. The journey was but short, and he was soon nearing the corner mentioned.

Fifteenth street, west of Ninth avenue, is not the most elegant part of New York, and the long, dark stretch which led to the river did not look inviting as Royal approached.

He did not see Gus Leonard, and, at first, no one appeared to be there, but as he came nearer, a boy of about ten years appeared from the shadow of the Elevated Railroad steps.

He stared at Jim, and then walked forward and asked:

"Say, boss, is you de one who was ter meet a gent here?"

"What 'gent'?"

"Gus Leonard."

"Suppose I am—what then?"

"He's down dere, an' you's ter come dat way. See?"

The boy had pointed toward the North River, but Royal sharply asked:

"Where is 'down there'?"

"Why, it's down by dat house, where Mal Gragan lives. Se? De gent ain't wisible from here, but dat's a part of his game. See?"

"Boy, who sent you here to lie to me?"

"Hey? Wot's dat?"

"Gus Leonard is not here, and you know it. You are a decoy, to lure me into a trap. Who sent you?"

The Spotter deftly caught the boy and held him tightly, but the latter took it very coolly.

"Gee-whiz! ef dere's anythin' wrong, I don't know it, boss. Is only deliverin' de message as he sent it, an' he's down dere a-pipin' de house, now. I s'pect he's got a graft. See?"

Jim could not tell whether this was innocence or nerve, but he determined to test the matter.

"You can lead the way, but mark one thing down: If you are luring me into the hands of my enemies, you shall be the first to suffer. I have a revolver, and shall wing you, first off!"

"Dat's all right, boss; I ain't in no scheme. I don't pretend ter answer fer de gent, but ef he's crooked, I ain't. You kin do ez you please about goin'; I's got de stuff. See?"

He exhibited a small coin.

"Lead on!" Royal directed.

The boy accepted the order with the same calm indifference which had marked his manner before, and began to move down the street. Royal followed. His doubts had not abated, but he was thoroughly on the alert. His threat, which, of course, had been idle talk, had not accomplished anything, but if the boy was safe, such was not the case with any one who might molest him.

He had his revolver ready for use.

They went on the north side of the street. On the south side was a long row of trucks, housed for the night in the economical fashion dear to the heart of the New York teamster, and there, as elsewhere, the barren thoroughfare furnished abundant refuge for evil-doers.

With every sense on the alert, the Spotter went to make the test. He knew the danger would come before the house was reached, if at all.

He had a sharp eye on the trucks, but no

skulking figure was to be seen. Yet, the attack came, and in earnest.

A flash, the whistling of a bullet, the report of a revolver.

The leaden missile had passed so close to the detective's head that it was the narrowest of misses. The boy took to his heels and ran like a scared coyote. But Royal remained, and he faced the danger. Another shot followed quickly, but it went so far wide as to suggest that the marksman had grown excited. A third shot flew far over Jim's head.

By that time he had the would-be assassin fully located. He was in a covered wagon, but wholly invisible, and circumstances went to show that he had cut a hole in the light covering and was using it for gunning purposes. The Spotter raised his own revolver, took deliberate aim and fired.

A yell followed, and then all was still.

Determined not to be thrown off his guard, Royal made no haste to act, but at that moment a patrolman came rushing up. His first idea was to arrest Jim and drag him away immediately, but when the latter had shown his badge and explained the situation, the blue-coat became a stout ally, and they advanced toward the wagon.

An ambush was to be feared, but when they saw that the assassin's revolver had fallen outside the wagon the danger seemed to grow less.

Promptly they investigated and found a prostrate man inside.

"Hallo, my covey!" the policeman cried, "who the blazes are you?"

"I'm a dyin' man!" groaned the fallen bravo, feebly. "The bullet is in my body; I'm done fer!"

The voice was a revelation to Royal.

"Chunky Jake!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER XX.

A SURPRISE AT ELWELL'S.

"THAT'S me!" the fallen man agreed, with another groan.

"Well," Spotter Jim tartly returned, "I trust you are satisfied with the result of your little ambush?"

"I never missed afore; never, never! What devil hoodooed my luck I don't know, an' I couldn't believe when I seen you still standin'. But you fired well; you did, b'mighty! I'm done fer; I'm a dyin' man!"

"Where are you hit?"

"Right in the heart."

"Nonsense! Your tongue would not run so briskly if you were perforated there."

"Wal, the blood is runnin' like sin; look fer yourself."

"If you are going to die I advise you to ease your conscience at once. Where have you taken Mrs. Gray?"

"Hi! don't you wish I's old woman enough ter git a wobble on my tongue an' peach? I ain't built that way; I'll die game. Chunky Jake ain't no sneak."

"Look you, if you want any show with us you had better not shield the man who got you into all this trouble. Mowbrey Elwell and his plots are wholly responsible for your downfall. Only for him you would not be here. Why should you ruin your own chances by standing by a man who would do you up in a twinkling if his interests demanded it?"

"Boss, you talk it well, but ef the perleece ain't prone ter do a feller up I'm a liar. I know them of old, by mighty!"

The burglar's vigorous remarks led to the belief that he was more frightened than hurt, but examination showed he had a bad wound. The chance shot had entered his left side, and blood had escaped freely. The policeman went to summon an ambulance, while Jim renewed his efforts to get a confession.

Chunky Jake was firm, however; not a word would he say.

In due time the ambulance came and he was taken away.

The following morning saw no change in the situation. Royal went to see the burglar, and was told that, while he was in no danger of death, he would have plenty of time to think before he would be a well man again. He, however, persisted that he was going to die, and upon this belief the detective based most of his hopes. The burglar might yet confess.

On Jim's return the Spotter Trio held another conference with Gus Leonard and Bertina as adjunct members, and the question of applying for a search-warrant and going boldly to Elwell's house was discussed. If it had not seemed such a reckless move on the arch-plotter's part, he would have tried the experiment would have been tried.

While they hesitated Bertina came to the front.

"You just let me try my hand," she advised. "Mr. Stumps went ter the Mebaloe Flats an' found he could sell to 'most everybody. Ignorant folks generally do buy of peddlers. Now, why can't I go ter Elwell's as a peddler, get inside an' look around? The servants will look at my goods sure, unless they have the very strictest orders never to see a peddler."

"You mustn't take the risk, Bertina!" Stumps declared, quick.

"Risk! Don't you think I'm willing to risk something for Mrs. Gray? But there's no risk in this, an' I'm goin'. So there, now!"

Blonde Bert spoke with emphasis, and the thoughtful expression on Jim's face showed he was not disposed to condemn the plan hastily. It did not appear that she would risk any great danger, and when he had said so, the matter was fully discussed.

The result was that some shopping was done in a hurry, and a quantity of articles obtained such as were dear to the heart of the average servant girl. Two baskets, neither of which was too new to be suspicious, completed the purchases. In these the goods were duly placed, Bertina took one and Bobby the other, and then they left the house.

A street-car bore them as far up-town as the vicinity of Elwell's house, where they alighted. After a little talk they separated and Bertina went on alone.

To carry out her plan naturally she first called at the basement of other houses, but made no efforts to develop talent as a saleswoman until the mansion of interest was reached.

She was in something of a flutter when she rung the bell, but looked calm enough when a plump, jolly Irishwoman answered the summons.

"Please, ma'am, won't you buy something of me?" she asked, pleadingly.

"Go along wid you!" was the retort. "What do I be wantin' wid your old traps?"

"But they are new an' nice. Can't you help a poor girl with a sick mother? Sure, there's a heap o' trouble in this world for a lone widder."

"It's safe bettin' you hev a father an' seven stout brothers, all too lazy to worruk."

Despite this proof that she knew the way of the world the servant condescended to lift one of the gaudy articles in the basket, and, with the ice once broken, Bertina talked so well that she was duly admitted. Once there she was surrounded by the servants. The scene was one few women could resist, and the young vender could find no fault with the way she was treated.

The one male servant hung around the group and made observations which he intended should be funny and sarcastic.

"Better buy some jimcrack for the mysterious woman up-stairs," he finally suggested.

"Sure, and who'll give them to her? I'm not sure but sight of her face would strike us dead," declared a pert chambermaid.

"You'll not die that way, I'm thinkin'."

Bertina was again in a flutter, but she concealed her emotion and quietly remarked:

"I'd like to take some things up an' sell to the lady."

The male servant laughed loudly.

"Well, ask the master. Sure, if he keeps her locked in he ought to let her buy a little shoddy stuff as a mental pacifier."

"You hush your noise, Tom!" one of the female servants commanded. "Do you want us all to lose our places? The master's business isn't any of our business. You dry up!"

"Who is this lady you're talkin' about?" Bertina asked, in a very matter-of-fact way, as she deftly spread out a part of her collection.

"Enough has been said about her. Close your mouths, all of you!" directed the leading spirit of the servants, sharply.

Blonde Bert was more affected by this order than any one else, but she had heard enough, already, to raise her hopes high. Who should the "mysterious" lady be who was kept locked up, if not Mrs. Gray?

At that moment, as she stood near the window, she saw that a carriage had stopped in front of the house. Four persons came from the closed interior. The first two were strangers. The next—she started as she recognized Ezra Otis. The last—wonderful fact—was Bobby Blossom!

Bert could not understand that. She did not believe the two strangers were officers, though Otis looked pale and frightened enough to be a criminal in the hands of law.

What could Bobby be doing in that crowd?

This was a question which young Mr. Blossom himself, would have found it hard to answer, but he was in the swim and going whither the current ran. The bell was rung, and Mowbrey Elwell, himself, opened the door. Bobby experienced some fear that he would be recognized, but the rich man hardly looked at him. The Spotter's present companions had seen him and taken him at random to fill the place of another boy, known to Elwell by reputation, whom they had failed to get as a companion.

"Come in, at once!" he directed.

All crossed the threshold, though Ezra Otis's manner indicated a desire to flee. He had been assured, however, that his one chance of escaping arrest lay in submission, and, though he had no faith in Elwell's word, he knew matters could not be made worse for him, and was resolved to accept the one chance.

The entire party were conducted to the back-parlor.

"Wait here!" Elwell directed, and went out.

On being left alone one of the men crossed over to Bobby and whispered earnestly and warningly to him. The boy heard and nodded.

"That's all right," he returned. "I'm fly!"

He was more "fly" than the man imagined, or he cared to confess. Ezra Otis regarded him with a brief degree of hope and interest, but it soon died away.

Footsteps sounded outside and Elwell re-entered. By his side walked a lady, and light flashed in Bobby's eyes.

It was Madeline Gray!

CHAPTER XXI.

HEMMED IN.

ELWELL paused and looked alternately at Mrs. Gray and Otis, a sneering smile on his face, but if he expected either to speak he was disappointed. They looked; they did no more. They looked—and each in a hopeless way. Then Elwell turned toward Bobby Blossom and favored him with a very sharp glance.

"You are the boy mentioned to me by Chunky Jake, are you?" he asked.

"Yes; I'm de boy," quoth Robert, with a swagger.

"And I can rely on you?"

"Boss, I never goes back on me friends."

"You're all right, I think. Men, you can retire to the basement and await my call. This boy I will keep here, for our jail-bird may see fit to fight, and I want a messenger near. Don't go out, and don't talk with the servants."

The men who were fairly well-dressed, but hard-featured persons, withdrew, and Elwell, Mrs. Gray, Otis and Bobby were left as the only occupants of the room. The old, sneering smile came back to Elwell's face as he regarded those he had so fully in his power.

"I have brought you two together," he presently said, "to let you squirm and writhe on the hook all you wish. I think you fit companions: a woman who has proved recreant to her family, a man who robbed a bank and wore a convict's stripes."

"Unjustly!" cried Otis, vehemently. "You know, sir, that no man was ever more true to his trust than I was when cashier of the Marlstone Bank. You know I never robbed it, and there is another who knows it, too. She—she could clear me, if she would!"

He pointed to Mrs. Gray, but she as quickly answered:

"I cannot prove it. Would to Heaven I could!"

"Now, don't you two begin your denials and recriminations," Elwell directed, with the air of one in power. "You are both guilty. I have brought you together, now, to show that, as in the past, I am master of the situation. But I am not, and never was, a hard man. I don't like to see you two in such misery, and have studied out a way to assist you. If you will both leave the country, promising never to return, I will see you safely away. You, Alton Chase—or Ezra Otis, if you prefer the name—are a convict escaped from Sing Sing. The police are on your track, and the only wonder is that you've not been caught. Liberty will be precious to you. Now, hear my plan: I will furnish you with money, and with a stout yacht in which you can go to Brazil, or any point you choose. After that you will be safe—if you keep away from this country."

"I will not go!" cried Mrs. Gray.

"No."

"Your plot is too transparent. If we started on the voyage we should not be alive four days after. Your tools would throw us overboard. That is your scheme!"

"Nonsense!"

"I will not go!"

"Woman, if you defy me, it will be a sad day for you!" Elwell exclaimed, angrily.

"I refuse to go to sure death."

"Then, by the fiends! you shall go, anyhow, and if anything *does* happen on the voyage, it will be your fault."

"Sir, you will never get me to the yacht. Let the result be what it may, all shall be settled now! I will scream for help—"

He sprung toward her, but, at that moment, the door was flung open and three muscular men entered. The foremost was Jim Royal.

"Yowlin cats!" Bobby exclaimed, in delight.

But Elwell was less pleasantly surprised, and he glared fiercely at the unceremonious intruders.

"What in perdition does this mean?" he shouted.

"Simply that we are an escort to an old friend of yours. Here he comes!"

Then other men entered, and between them they half-carried Chunky Jake. At that sight Elwell lost color. One look was enough to show that Jake was a stricken man. His pallor told that; and Jake, wounded, perhaps dying, was not the bold helper of old. The rich man stood speechless, looking blankly on the crowd. Besides Otis, Bobby and Jim Royal, he saw Gus Leonard, Stumps, Bertina, and strange men who had a detective-like look.

"With the help of a certain girl-peddler we have all come in quietly at the basement," continued Jim, "and now, having quelled your men below, we are ready for business. Mr. Chunky Jake has a word to say."

"He shall not speak! He shall not lie."

"Be quiet, sir!"

"I will not! No power on earth can make me endure this outrage."

But the power was there, in the shape of a revolver in a detective's hands, and when, after long blustering, he was quieted, Chunky Jake spoke:

"I'm a dyin' man," he said, hoarsely, "an' I'm goin' ter free my conscience afore I go off. See? I may be weak, but the strength has gone out with my blood. That man there," and he pointed to Otis, "was sent ter prison fer robbin' the Marlstone Bank when he was its cashier, but he was innocent. Mowbrey Elwell an' I did the robbin'; we was the criminals!"

The rich man glared in silence, but Madeline Gray Elwell fell upon her knees.

"Thank Heaven!" she cried, fervently. "I knew, but could not prove it. I overheard Mowbrey Elwell and Jake talk of it, and make a practical confession, but proof—Oh! I could not give that. I knew Elwell could account for every moment of his time the night of the robbery. How could he be the robber? Even now I don't see."

"The bank was robbed two nights afore 'twas found out," Jake explained, "an' Elwell covered it up until he could spring it an' hev an *alibi* ready. That man, Alton Chase, the cashier, had no hand in it."

"Again I thank Heaven!" feverishly added Madeline. "Mr. Chase, you wronged me when you said I could prove your innocence if I would. I did send you an anonymous note while you were awaiting trial, and my strange looks and swoon in the court-room gave you a clew, vague, but correct. But I knew nothing; I could not save you in the face of Elwell's *alibi*."

"As it was, I did all I could. I told him I had overheard the talk between him and Jake, and besought him not to ruin your life. What was the result? I was the wife of his dead son, yet he swore he would kill me at once if I spoke out. He put me in terrible fear; he subdued my will. As I could prove nothing, I kept silent."

"But that did not save me. He put me in an insane asylum, and when I escaped, his tools hunted me with dogs. Once he shot at me on the streets of New York. He made my life a horror, and I dared not appeal to the police—words can not tell how I feared him."

"I dared not leave my own room, and solitude there made me mad, mad! I attempted my own life—but let me not speak of that. For several hours I have been his prisoner here. Living in horror as I did, I left my room on Thirteenth street to hire new quarters. I was seized on the street; I was taken to the Mebaloe Flats, and then here, a prisoner."

"It's all over," added Chunky Jake; "your troubles an' my life are about fled, but," he hypocritically added, "I won't no longer stand by the man who led me into crime. Elwell an' I was the bank-robbers!"

Backward the bank president stepped, and out from his pocket came a revolver. Three times he fired—at Chunky Jake, at Madeline

and at himself. When it was over the first two were uninjured, but Mowbrey Elwell lay dead on the floor.

Even when it was known that Mowbrey Elwell was the real bank-robber, people found it hard to believe, but when the dead man's affairs were settled up it was found that he was not the rich man he had been thought, and that, at the time of the robbery, he had only escaped business failure at the expense of his partners in the bank—by robbing it and them.

Chunky Jake did not die, after all, and is now back in a place he had been visiting periodically for twenty years—State's Prison.

Cleopatra received a term on the island.

Alton Chase's reputation was cleared, at last, and he was again given the cashiership of the bank.

Madeline Gray Elwell is happy. Free from danger and trouble, her life is calm and peaceful. She is now Mrs. Leonard, for Gus set a price on his services and received it. The price named was her hand, and she married him.

The Three Spotters, with Bertina as an aid, of course continued their detective work. Alert, honest and expert, they continued to do their part to free New York from its law-breakers and thugs, and their success as trailers brought them fresh renown.

THE END.

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